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The horizontal life: poems, stories, essays

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THE HORIZONTAL LIFE:
POEMS, STORIES, ESSAYS

by

Debra K. Marquart

A Thesis Submitted to the
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River City: "Naming the Beast"

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F O R E W O R D

What you hold in your hands is a forced confluence: portions of three separate manuscripts -- two prose and one poetry -- which I have been working on concurrently during my time at Iowa State.

The stories and essays about childhood, drawn from my own experiences growing up in a small town, belong to Grim Tales From Dinky Towns, a largely nonfictional manuscript that explores rurality and a child's yearning to escape. The fiction pieces about musicians are from Playing for the Door, my fictional exploration of seven very real years I spent on the road as a professional rock musician. The poetry that is sprinkled throughout belongs to Everything's a Verb, a completed poetry manuscript.

Since I have decided to bring these pieces together under the rubric of The Horizontal Life -- pieces that are so clearly disparate not only in genre, voice and style, but also geographically and thematically -- I feel I must explain my purposes.

The poet Audre Lorde once expressed her hopes of finding another genre, what she called "biomythography," in which the author through writing could trace a roadmap through his or her own private landscape: autobiographical and cultural as well as mythological.

FOREWORD - PAGE 2

Looking at literature biomythographically causes individual poems, stories and essays to become colorful strings of thread in a larger tapestry. This unfinished tapestry includes colored-in regions (what we have already written), lightly penciled-in sections (the outline for things we hope to someday write), and unknown border regions of blank canvas (things still unlived, or still a mystery to us).

Whether we write creatively or critically, this in-progress canvas is what we set our pens to every day when we return to our desks to write.

Writers write, Joan Didion theorizes, because of a "predilection for loss." I began writing in 1983 when I came off the road after seven thrilling and devastating years of road life. A financial catastrophe brought me off the road: late one evening driving home from a one-nighter, our road crew crashed in our equipment truck and sixty-thousand dollars worth of musical equipment went up in a gasoline fire. Fortunately, no lives were lost, but we had no insurance; it was not possible to insure rock and roll equipment back then.

The next afternoon standing by the side of the road surveying the damage, I was struck with the awesome destructive power of fire -- that it could take things so real, so precious, and so expensive and

FOREWORD - PAGE 3

reduce them to these very few ashes piled in the ditch. All that was left of the equipment and the truck was approximately fifty magnet speaker grilles which were made of a metal apparently too dense to burn and the thin frame of the truck. The exterior of the truck had melted away, but the engine, cab and the long axle looked like a charred dragonfly lying on its side in the ditch.

In the ten years since, I have never been able to write effectively about the fire and its significance to me -- this is still part of an imagined but unexplorable region of my writing. But in 1983, I turned to writing as a way out of the very deep hole I then found myself in. As I wrote I became aware that "traveling," both culturally and physically, and "the desire for escape" were important and recurring themes in my work. I set out to understand why.

All writing in some sense, but especially autobiographical writing about childhood focuses on distances crossed. When the writer looks at his or her childhood, the adult narrator must negotiate the chasm of time and memory that stands between the adult and the remembered child. In choosing these particular pieces for The Horizontal Life, I hoped to hi-lite the distances crossed in my own life and writing, as well as in my writing process.

FOREWORD - PAGE 4

Beginning to write prompted a great rush of memory in me, largely because life on the road required a kind of amnesia. I had gambled everything to be a musician: lived nowhere, kept nothing. I had traded away important relationships and severed ties with my family because they disapproved of my choice to be a musician. Through writing I was able to recoup some of those losses. More importantly I have been able to explain, to myself and to others, some of what drove me all those years.

The Sioux holy man, Black Elk, in his life-narrative recorded by John Neihardt, equated life to a song we are composing. Every day we write a few notes for that song, and at the end of our lives, death will take us to our favorite place on earth -- the place that for us is the center of the universe -- and we will be allowed to sing our song once in its entirety while death stands by and listens. And while the song goes on, death cannot touch us. It must wait until we are finished singing.

The words in these pages are parts of that song-in-progress. They trace a very crooked path through an unfinished landscape. Every word has been sweated over and paid for. I have found answers and great joy in the making of these pages, and it's my hope that you will find the same in reading them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	FINDING THE WORDS [poem]
3	PLAYING FOR THE DOOR [short story]
8	WHEN THE NAMES STILL FIT THE FACES [poem]
10	THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN [essay]
26	AND WHO DO YOU BELONG TO? [poem]
28	NAMING THE BEAST [short story]
49	RIDING SHOTGUN THROUGH IOWA WITH QUEST TALKING ABOUT ALL THINGS INEVITABLE [poem]
52	THE HORIZONTAL LIFE [essay]
61	MOTORCADE [poem]
63	GETTING WINGS [short story]
87	GRANDFATHER'S HANDS [poem]
88	THE MOON [short story]
97	DOING THE TWIST [poem]
99	TALKING ANDER DOWN [short story]
119	THE WOMAN ON THE DANCE [poem]

TABLE OF CONTENTS

120	SANTIAGO'S DEAD [short story]
158	SHIT & THE DREAM OF IT [poem]
160	INTENT TO RETURN [essay]
180	WATCHING JO ANN CASTLE PLAY [poem]
182	TOMBSTONE SALES [short story]
202	SOMEWHERE IN A HOUSE WHERE YOU ARE NOT [poem]

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.

-- Ben Okri, The Famished Road.

FINDING THE WORDS

When I walk it, the path
to the lost words
will be strewn with socks, gloves, earrings,
all the twins of things
I've lost on this long journey out.
I'll gather them up like toys
in my skirt, following the thin trail,
this hedge I have kept against famine,
fatigue and loss of direction.
I'll search for signposts,
rings of keys, all eighteen pairs
of sunglasses ever lost to me.
All the fifty-second cards
to the decks I never played,
will slip from my sleeves.
Every dead letter
will be returned to me.

Along the road,
I'll have a chance to see
my old three dogs named Tippy,
Susie, my one-eyed cat,
all the grandparents,
all the greats and even
my virginity will flush out
from somewhere, pull the last
mauve ribbon from my hair,
as I pass, reeling, now,
on furious stallions,
their crazy manes blazing
a path through the deepest
part of the woods.
The forest, bending

FINDING THE WORDS -2

to greet us, leads us to
the clearing where burns
the fire that burns from
the center of the earth.

It is here I will dance
my final dance, pounding
my feet into the dirt.
I will sit down and sing
this plain song,
long and low and sweet.
Syllables flying
from my tongue like sparks
from a chip of flint.

PLAYING FOR THE DOOR

You work hard to buy your first electric guitar. You deliver papers, then pizzas. Your grandparents are disappointed, at first, when they find out you have given up the cornet, but they agree to match funds to buy your first amplifier. You agree to pay them back whenever you have the money, or, in ninety-nine years, whichever comes first. At the music store where you go to buy the equipment, the lady behind the counter winks at your father. You wonder if she knows something you don't.

You practice for months, years, in your bedroom, in your basement, or at some friend's house whose parents are gone for the weekend. You listen to records and try to make yourself sound just like the person on the record. Sometimes you do, but mostly you just sound like yourself trying to sound like somebody else. Eventually, you meet a couple of other guys at school who have amps. One guy has a mom who is really cool, so she lets the group practice in her basement.

That summer your girlfriend decides to have a full-blown birthday party and she hires your band to play for it. There's no money involved, but there is free pop and all the pizza you can eat. You only know eleven songs together but nobody appears to mind.

After that performance you notice your girlfriend seems to like you a lot better.

You and the band begin to work up original music in the event that a major recording label happens to seek you out. You work up other songs too, but are careful not to learn anything that's popular or on the radio at the time.

That fall your older brother hires you for a party at his frat house. There's no money involved, but there are kegs and plenty of college women roaming around. Nobody applauds after your original music, but, you decide, they're too busy listening to clap. You only know twenty songs, but nobody seems to care.

One of the frat brothers is from a town about sixty miles away where, he says, there's a club that would be just perfect for your band to play. There would be no money involved, you understand, but you could play for the door, and just think of the exposure you'd be getting.

So you rent a P.A. from a local sound company -- because the guitar amp you were singing through at the frat party blew up -- and you rent a U-haul to transport the extra equipment, and your friend's cool mom lends you her Oldsmobile with the hitch on the back.

You get out of town late that day, because your drummer is sleeping when you go to pick him up, and as you get to the edge of town, there's a long, slow train passing through, so you flip off the guy in the caboose as he rolls by.

These big, old cars were meant to go seventy, you figure, as you cruise down Highway 10. When the hot light comes on, you assume it's a manufacturer's defect, something she forgot to tell you about. It's not until after you get your equipment unloaded that you notice the large pool of oil under the car.

Before the gig, you all decide to take long breaks and play short sets. That way no one will notice you're repeating every song at least once. You only know thirty songs together, but, as it turns out, nobody is sober enough to remember.

Your drummer -- who's obsessed with counting -- counts all the people in the club during breaks. He says there's at least one hundred people right now, not counting the comers and goers. At two bucks a head, that makes two hundred bucks, easy. He's busy trying to decide whether he'll buy Paiste or Zildjian cymbals with all the money you're making.

At the end of the night, the club owner gives you twenty-five dollars. He says it's because you were too loud, nobody liked you, and, besides, two of you are not even old enough to be playing in this club, so you better get the hell out of here or he's gonna call the sheriff.

You walk to the phone booth on the corner. You call your dad and ask him to come and pick you up. You also ask him for twelve hundred bucks to replace the engine in your friend's cool mom's car.

* * * * *

There's no need for me to go on with this story because you know what happens next: it happened to you.

The way your girlfriend didn't mind paying for her own (and your) movie, and then later, her own (and your) drinks. The way she pretended that her car belonged to both of you.

The way your job at Burger King -- where you started working to pay off your relatives -- cut into your practice schedule. And how the night manager watched you like a hawk because you were a musician and he thought you might A) be on drugs, B) steal something, or C) try to get out of working Friday and Saturday nights.

The way your dad kept a comfortable distance from you because he was afraid that if he was too nice to you at any given moment, you might ask him for more money.

The way the guys in your band quit, one by one, and were replaced by other people who quit, always for the same reasons: no money, and eventually you've got to do something with your life. You were so stupid that you thought being a musician was doing something with your life.

The way the booking agent smelled of booze when he shook your hand and told you your band had zero entertainment value, making big fat zeroes with his big fat little hands, suggesting a fog machine or choreography as possible improvements.

You knew this agent had his own band, and that he kept the two-thousand-dollar-a-night bookings for himself, throwing the five-hundred-mile-away gigs to his young bands. You knew all these things, but you didn't say anything -- not to his face.

And then there was that crusty club owner who shoved you when you were bold enough to try and collect on a contract he owed you. You knew he had a history of bleeding bands to death, letting them play for the door, and not giving them what they had coming. But you were not young anymore, so this time you called the cops yourself.

You probably remember best the way people laughed, when they asked you what you were planning to do when you grew up, because they knew they were being cliché, but still they wanted to know.

And the way you finally noticed that all those guys in Hewlett-Packard commercials have nice-looking wives, cushy condos, and cellular phones, so you changed your major from music to business with a computer science minor.

How about the way you winked at the lady behind the counter of the music store, when you sold your equipment back to her?

Or the way that sometimes you still go to nightclubs with your lovely wife and tell her stories about your years as a musician -- the details growing dimmer, the stories growing sweeter with each telling.

WHEN THE NAMES STILL FIT THE FACES

On a shelf in the back of the big closet
after her death we found stacks and stacks

of photo albums full of her subjects. How many
did she fool with her stammering just-a-seconds,

her fiddling, this darn thing, her eye stalling
for the perfect cinematic moment, that infinity

of seconds when genuine smiles stretch thin
and elastic, loose arms thrown casually

over shoulders grow heavy and unnatural.
The early photos feature new cars and old

farmhouses, plain women in fancy dresses
and men in uniform. The later photos are thick

with nyloned thighs, Christmas trees dripping
with ornaments, uncles long dead and children

long grown old. Surely, this is the trail
she would have us follow, back to the people

we would never know, the selves we would never
remember, back to the time when the names

still fit the faces. In the end fearing loss
of memory she took to labeling every photo,

putting the name, finally, to the image,
sprawling Ed across Ed's blank forehead,

tracing Reinhold on a high, thin, cheekbone,
spiraling Emma up Emma's bleach-blonde

WHEN THE NAMES STILL FIT THE FACES - 2

beehive. She, the hand behind the shutter
is seldom pictured. Only in rare moments

when someone has seized the camera
and forced her finally into the frame

does she appear, grinning, big-boned,
and out of context, with a large Me

emblazoned across her ample bosom.

T H R O U G H T H E B E A D E D C U R T A I N

In the third grade, I did very well in the screaming auditions for Hansel and Gretel; I got to be the witch. Oh sure, there were other kids who could yell louder and for longer periods of time, but the sisters picked me because of the let's-put-the-mean-witch-in-the-oven scene. I got the part because I was small enough to fit into the oven but my scream was big and mean and gritty and said, "I'm not just a kid in a black wig in here wrinkling crackly paper to make it sound like fire." It said, "I'm a goddamn, for real witch, and I'm getting my fuckin' ass burned off in here." That's what I think it sounded like, looking back at it now.

First I had to compete against my best friend, Janie Hilzendger, a tall girl with a voice like a foghorn. I knew no matter how good she was, she wasn't going to fit into the oven, but the nuns went ahead and let her holler her head off anyway. Candy Fettig was small enough, but when she got up to the stage, she just hunched over and whimpered in a little voice. She was pathetic. I had never seen a witch, but at least I knew what they sounded like. I knew they sounded mean like snake venom or something; and the nuns must have known that too because they let Candy go back to class.

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 2

We sat there for a while, and pretty soon the nuns called Bobby Fetzer's name. She walked up to the stage with her chest thrown way out in front of her. She stood up there tugging at her dress and yelping every so often like she was getting stung by a bee. We had to laugh then because it made us feel funny, all that howling, and every time she yelped, we just jumped up in our seats.

The elimination rounds went on like this forever, my throat getting more and more raw every time I was called up. Finally it started to sound thick and growly like some animal that was maybe wounded out there in the trees. I think that's when it started to make the nuns nervous; I noticed they tittered and leaned together in their seats every time they heard it.

I should have known then that I had a destiny -- a vocation, as Father Proeller used to call it every time he spoke to us about how we were all going to grow up to be priests and nuns. I should have known then that I had a vocation to be a rock and roll singer.

My mother made me a witch costume for the part. It had a long, flowing black skirt and a black blouse with puffy sleeves. We raided the Christmas decorations and spray painted some angel hair black. After it dried, I pasted it to a hairnet and arranged the hair so it fell in long strands down my shoulders. To complete the costume, my dad got a broom from the hardware store, which the nuns told me I had

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 3

to lose before I went into the oven; otherwise Hansel wouldn't be able to get the door closed.

I still have the photograph my mother took of me that night before we left for the performance. In the picture I'm standing in front of my parents' house trying to look wicked. I'm straddling the broom like a Harley.

I have another picture, taken in the same spot one year later, after my mother had turned the witch's costume into a nun's habit for the school Halloween party. The only change she had to make was replacing the black wig with a long, black handkerchief which I liked much better because it flowed straight down my back and didn't smell or itch. Everything else stayed the same, except for the broom which I had lost by then anyway.

That year -- the year my witch's costume was converted into a nun's habit -- I sang in public for the first time. There was a song called "Dominique" that was popular on the radio. This song had about thirty verses all recounting the wondrous feats of this character, Dominique, a nomadic do-gooder. The chorus went something like this: Dominique-anique-anique over the land he plods along and sings his little song. Never asking for reward he just talks about the Lord. He just talks about the Lord.

The radio version had been sung by a real nun, so the sisters -- when they saw my nun's costume at the Halloween party -- decided that I was to perform it for the Christmas concert. I remember, I had a

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 4

hard time memorizing all those verses, but I knew if I happened to mess up a verse there was always that sensational chorus to fall back on.

After the Christmas concert the Sisters carted me off to the senior citizen's home where I played to a real tough crowd over there, what with the infirmity and all. The next day I had to sing "Dominique" again to each individual class. By this time I was getting pretty sick of this song, and all those thirty verses, and especially I was getting sick of the way the sisters had instructed me to sing it: with my hands folded neatly in prayer and a devout look on my face.

By the twenty-ninth verse of the eighteenth performance, I was just about wishing that old Dominique had never lived, or if he had lived that he would have stayed home a bit more. Thinking about it now, I know what the sisters were doing. They were just using me for recruiting purposes, you know, the world's youngest nun, and you could be one too.

I have always been a singer. My whole family sang and, I guess, especially when I was young, I thought singing was something that everyone did, like eating and sleeping. When we drove to Bismarck -- four times a year at the change of season -- we would always sing. But we didn't sing "Blue Suede Shoes" or "Good Golly, Miss Molly."

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 5

We sang, Whoops, there goes another rubber tree plant, kerplunk, and Michael rowed the boat ashore, Hallelujah.

We also sang every Sunday night of the summer when my father would herd us into the Chevy to look at the crops. We sang as we passed the waving rows of wheat; we sang to the orange sun dropping off into the horizon; but mostly, we sang for the ice cream we knew we were going to get at the Dairy Maid, after we ran out of crops to look at.

In those days, rock and roll didn't impress me much, not even when my older sister took me to see "A Hard Day's Night." I still remember the lime-green sleeveless shift she wore to the theater that night and the velveteen bow she pinned into this beehive hairdo that was somehow laquered onto her head.

She sniffed and cried throughout the entire movie, digging for her hankie every five minutes or so. I wanted to ask her why she was crying. I wanted to ask her who the Beatles were, why they kept running from place to place and why people were always ripping their clothes off. They looked like nice enough boys, like they hadn't done anything wrong; and they were good singers too. I especially liked it when they did that high oooh stuff.

I had a recurring nightmare when I was young about a little girl who had no home and slept on grates in the street. In the dream, the little girl would wake up, and realize that she was me; then I would wake up and realize that I was her. The Beatles reminded me of that

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 6

dream: all that running around in the street and no mom and dad in sight.

I have a theory about music, which I usually never take credit for because I think I read it somewhere and have forgotten the source. I usually begin talking about this theory by saying, "I read somewhere about a study that was done." But I'm going to go on record now as saying that I believe this is my theory.

This theory, anyway, says that people become more susceptible to music at certain times in their life, such as the times when they are courting and mating. Ask anyone what song was playing on the radio the night they were driving around and got their first kiss or their first feel and they could probably tell you. I think it has a lot more to do with hormones than it has to do with music, but still the music gets remembered along with everything else.

For me, the important part of my theory is this: that the music, whatever is popular or being played at the time, is probably the music these people will keep for the rest of their lives.

The empirical evidence that I have to support this theory is the fact that my parents have gone uptown every Saturday night for the last forty years to dance the polka which is perhaps the most unromantic music known to man. Their explanation: the polka is a dance they have always, since their first date, been able to do well

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 7

together. When they dance the polka, they say, they glide on air.

I was about ten when I started hearing rock and roll and distinguishing it from something other than the door slamming, or the toilet flushing. That summer my parents hired a construction crew to build a garage on our land. I remember taking lemonade and cookies out to the tanned crew too many times each afternoon, and the way they laughed and poked one another every time I showed up with another tray. I would sit in the sun and watch the sweat trickle down their shoulders. I'd watch them lift the frosty glasses with their large hands, and in the background the radio would be playing: I saw her again last night but you know that I shouldn't.

It started then, I believe, and even now, every significant and insignificant event that remains crammed in my too-full-with-the-garbage-of-the-past mind is coupled with a memory of the music that was being played at the time.

Like the summer my brother played guitar for "The Mystic Eyes," and they practiced every night in our quonset. They did all those songs that had double words for titles like "Louie, Louie" and "Mony, Mony". They did "Little Red Riding Hood" and when the part came in the song where everyone howls, I would look out my window and aaoooh right along with them.

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 8

I sat in my bedroom with the window wide open and listened to their lanky lead singer wail away for Gloria, an unknown girl he was never going to meet. Chanting together, they would spell out her name, over and over, G-L-O-R-I-A, the letters rising up and losing their order in the cool night air.

When I got a little older, old enough to ride around with men in cars, I remember a particular convertible in which my hair would stand up straight on end under the rush of wind. Listening to Alice Cooper we would drive down the road singing, Eighteen and I can do what I want. Eighteen, I just don't know what I want; or speeding home from a drive-in showing of "Easy Rider" in a pumpkin-orange Mustang one night I remember everyone -- including the people in the back seat -- taking turns steering, everyone singing at the top of their lungs: Born to Be Wild.

It went on like this for years, rock and roll ornamenting my life, different but not much more important to me than the turquoise wallpaper my mother had plastered over all our walls. It was on a Sunday afternoon in '72 when I walked through the beaded curtain and the seduction occurred.

I remember the day, but not the date. It was spring, or fall, one of the transitional seasons. There was a party at Steve Benz's house. He was quite a few years older than me and he had been to

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 9

Vietnam. Steve had always been crazy, everyone knew that, but after he came back from Nam he was different. He had a wildness. I had known he was crazy ever since one night while I was driving around with him he sped up to hit a black cat that was crossing the street. When I screamed he slammed on the brakes and looked at me as if I were interrupting some sort of sacrament he was performing. The look on his face was one hundred percent, pure, wild-eyed maniac.

It was Steve who had gotten me stoned for the first time a few years earlier. I had smoked a few times, but all I had felt was time passing a little slower and I hadn't liked that. (When you grow up in a small town, the last thing you want is to make the time go more slowly.)

One night Steve invited a car load of girls that I was driving around with to come out to the country and smoke something he had brought back from California. We drove out to a road about a half mile from my parents' farm. Another car was already waiting for us. It was cold outside so everybody packed into Steve's car.

We had twelve, maybe thirteen, people in this big, green beast he was driving at the time; I think it was an Oldsmobile. I was sitting on the laps of two guys a little older than me. My three girlfriends had piled in the front seat along with Steve and another guy from town was up there with them too.

The pipe went around; the car got smokier and smokier. It was hot in the car, and humid. When I took a breath it would spook me

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 10

because I knew I was inhaling something that had just been inside the lungs of someone else. Everyone was talking at the same time so everyone talked louder, so they could all hear themselves. The radio was turned on but it didn't sound like a DJ; it sounded like someone just barking out syllables. I was listening hard, trying to piece the sounds together. I was thinking about my girlfriends in the front seat, laughing and moving against each other. They looked like three heads springing from one long body, like a litter of kittens that had just been born and I felt sad because I wanted to be up there with them.

I was staring like this into the front seat when Steve turned around to talk to me. His body didn't move but his head spun around on his neck like that ventriloquist's mannequin: the one with the big red lips. His hair was long and red and frizzy. He said something to me then waited, like he was expecting an answer; then he talked again. I watched his mouth, trying to catch the words as they came out, so that I could see them whole before the atmosphere screwed them up, but it didn't work. Right there, even at the tip of his lips, the words were already coming out in pieces. Steve raised one hand in the air above my head. It hovered over me like a bird caught in the car, then he patted my head twice really fast and said, "Nice. Nice."

I opened the car door and bailed out the side. A woman in the back seat with long, white hair and huge eyes like blue moonstones said, "It's not going to be any better -- out there."

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 11

I went out there anyway and traced my way with my hands to the back of the car. I rubbed my fingers over the curve of the tail light. Then I raised my head and saw it: up in the air there hung a grid, like a fishnet or a web stretched out across the entire sky, connecting everything. The web hummed and glowed and looked as if you could slip your foot through its rungs and climb it. On the top left corner, there was a red-white-and-blue flag with real exploding stars in it.

I did not move. I heard the car door open, then close. The sound of the radio and the slam of the door were swallowed up by the blackness of the open field. Steve inched his way to me at the back of the car. He asked me how I was. I pointed up. He looked at the glowing web and nodded as if he saw it too. He said he was sorry. He said he didn't know. I waved my hand, said I was OK, looked at the sky again, up to those singing, bright ropes, then turned around and vomited. He stayed outside with me and held me from behind. He talked to me in a soft voice. He pulled my hair up away from my face until I was finished.

I suppose it's appropriate then that it would be Steve who led me finally through the beaded curtain. After that night, the night of the burning ropes, I spent a lot of time with him mostly driving around and talking. It was never anything more than that because

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 12

Steve didn't seem interested in women, not in that way anyway. He was plenty interested in everything we had to say and in the way we moved and the things that made us laugh, but at the end of the night he always went home alone.

Steve lived in an old warehouse downtown. It was decorated in the style of the day: a green couch with no legs in the living room, a bare mattress on the bedroom floor, the obligatory black light room at the end of the hall and a beaded curtain between the living room and the kitchen.

Steve had a boa constrictor named Rainbow, that he had raised from just a baby. I could remember when that snake was so small that it had crawled into an eight track player in someone's car, and we had to take the tape player apart to get Rainbow out.

But this was a few years later and Rainbow was one big, honkin snake by then. The person sitting next to me at the party was holding Rainbow. That day, Rainbow must have smelled my perfume because he kept extending himself out, trying to land on my knee. Every time he got close I would move away and say, "Get that thing away from me." This went on all afternoon: me running away from this snake.

Steve loved rock and roll. Any time you went to a party at his house, you always listened to the best and latest music out. It was late on a Sunday afternoon, a long afternoon of talking and laughing and drinking and smoking, that he put on a new album from Led

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 13

Zeppelin. I had never really listened to this band, aside from what was on the radio, but this album was different. It hit you, he said, like a great weight.

Before Steve put the album on, he had made an announcement about how it was "THE" album, you know, like no other album had ever been, or ever would be recorded again. He turned the stereo up so loud the speakers rattled in the cabinets. He walked around the room telling everybody to shut up. I sat on the couch and listened because nobody could hear to talk anyway.

I listened to Robert Plant, the singer, to the way he approached a phrase from behind and swooped up on it, to the way he sang it different each time when you were expecting to hear it again just the same way, just because you had heard it that way the last time through. He made it sound like an accident and so you listened because you didn't know if you would ever hear it done quite like that again. I listened to Jimmy Page play these off-balance guitar solos, giving you this feeling that you were just barely wobbling with him through each song.

I don't remember actually hearing the drums, so much as feeling them -- the way that Bonham absorbed whatever space was left to him. Bonham was in the mix, like those airbags they were starting to put into cars that expanded on impact, holding everything together, seeping through all the cracks. You could almost visualize him sitting there, bringing the stick down to the snare in the slowest of

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 14

slow motions, keeping it from the rim just one second longer than you thought you could possibly bear. The beat could not be too slow, he had sounds to fill it.

Then this slow song came on, and I listened like I had never listened before. There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold and she's buying the stairway to heaven.

I listened to the way that Plant half-missed the note and then just came up from underneath it, to the way he played with the listener. I heard all of these things I had never heard before when he sang. There's a feeling I get when I look to the west and my spirit is crying for leaving.

The room slowed down. The music did not seem so loud anymore. It sounded crisp and fragile. We all sat and listened to the acoustic guitar, to the way it rang through the verses. We listened to the richness of this voice telling us the story about this lady. Your head is humming and it won't go, in case you don't know, the piper's calling you to join him. Dear lady can you hear the wind blow and did you know, your stairway lies on the whispering wind.

Then the acoustic guitars stopped and an army of electric guitars entered, ringing like church bells. They were chiming away over and over on one chord, calling you to listen to this really important news. I listened to all this happen that day for the first time: the huge drum fill that crowded everybody out, the chorus of electric guitars starting up like one great engine with hundreds of spinning

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 15

and whirring parts all working together to create this full, rich chord.

All of these sounds, milling and stewing around each other, taking up space suddenly split in two and step to the side for a singular voice that is rising slowly out of the well. It is the voice of a particular guitar trying to tell us in one final solo everything we need to know about the stairway and about the woman. What follows is the solo -- the most orgasmic guitar solo ever recorded.

It is at this moment, with the guitar coming in telling in a sweet voice the most melancholy tale I have ever heard, that Steve Benz comes through the beaded curtain. He stands in the doorway, strands of beads streaming down his body like water. His thick, red hair flying up off his shoulders. He is holding in his arms an imaginary guitar and into it he is playing all of it, all the sadness we are hearing. He plays all the tragedy he has seen into that guitar with his face, with his hands, with his body.

He tells it, the sadness, truer than it ever has been told to me, and I watch. I forget everything. I forget the dirty green couch and the stale air around me. I forget the boa constrictor that is on my knee, making its way up my arm and around my shoulders.

When I finally look at that snake, I see it is nothing like what I had thought it would be. It's dry and clean and strong. It climbs up around my neck and hangs from my shoulders. I touch it and talk

THROUGH THE BEADED CURTAIN

PAGE 16

to it, watching the way it moves: slowly with power in every cell. It anchors itself to my knee and extends out, half the length of its body. It shows me how it is possible to go far and still stay at home.

I carry that snake around the rest of the afternoon and all the rest of that night. People make jokes about my attachment to it, calling me the snake lady, calling me Medusa, calling me Eve. But I wear it anyway. I wear it with the same reverence the sisters wear their crosses to school every day: like a woman who has made a vow with the unseen.

AND WHO DO YOU BELONG TO?

Even in my ghost costume
I'm recognizable,
with my three older sisters
the nun, the witch and
the pirate, who are only in it
for the candy, and my brother,
who believes he is Napoleon.
It's not the question,
And what are you supposed
to be? that bothers me.
Under my clean, white sheet,
it's apparent, I'm a ghost.
It's the other question,
And who do you belong to?
that sets our feet shuffling.
Our answer, like a chicken bone,
we hold in our throats
considering treachery,
until finally, the nun
spits it out, our father's
name. And that is when
the wife calls the husband
off the couch, the dog
comes too, and even the parrot
takes note, it's Felix's
kids at their front door
mercy. We are the children
of Felix, of the "nice shirt,
too bad they didn't have one
your size." Felix of the
invisible stain, "I got your nose,
I got your nose" fame. And tonight

AND WHO DO YOU BELONG TO? -2

we go door-to-door, forced
to wait out the good laugh.
And I begin to cry, I'm so tired
of people laughing.
And I do not stop, not even
at the St. Philip Neri party
when they ask, How many jelly beans
in this jar? I get weepy
then because I only know
up to ten, so my sister,
the pirate, guesses for me,
writing down one number less
than her own guess,
and I end up winning
the whole goddamn jar.

N A M I N G T H E B E A S T

Maricopa has been stealing purple clothes. This is how she does it.

She goes into stores with her three small daughters. "Only browsing," she says, complimenting the salesgirl on her earrings. She invites the woman to pat the baby's fuzzy head.

Maricopa circles the store, baby stroller bumping through the aisles.

She's looking for an outfit, she tells the woman. Something to wear to San Francisco for her husband's medical convention. "Radiology," she says, ferreting through the displays, sliding the hangars along the aluminum rack.

The outfit Maricopa chooses comes in three colors, one of which is purple. She can't decide which color she likes best; it appears she has forgotten her color wheel at home. "I'll have to try them all," she tells the salesgirl, adding hesitantly, "I'm not sure if I'm an eight this week or a ten."

Maricopa (not her real name) confesses this to Kinky (also not her real name) Salazar one night, after Maricopa has put her three daughters to bed and the two women are standing in Maricopa's walk-in closet admiring all the purple things she has so larcenously acquired.

"This, I got at Dayton's." Maricopa pulls out a twinkling amethyst dinner jacket, sequins and pearls running around the edges.

Kinky Salazar is staying with Maricopa for a few weeks, waiting for her new band to worm their way up the circuit and pick her up. But before she shoves off Maricopa wants her advice: does this go with that? And doesn't she agree that when Maricopa finds her own band, she'll be in pretty good shape, clothingwise?

Kinky Salazar is eyeing the door. These days she assesses her level of comfort in any room by the number of exits it has. The walk-in closet is well-lit and neat. Every piece of clothing has its own hangar, nothing draped over the top of something else. Everything is spaced, just so, with a little bit of air between each hangar. But the door, that small window of opportunity, Maricopa looms large between herself and it.

So this is what it will be tonight. Kinky Salazar thinks. Last night it was the dramatic re-creation of the time a prowler broke into Maricopa's apartment: Maricopa hunching in the darkness at the top of the steps, waiting until the last possible moment, until the vague outline of his body, the muscular biceps and the moisture of his breath are almost on top of her, then flinging her body weight at him, toppling him backwards down the stairs.

As proof Maricopa shows Kinky Salazar the jimmy marks from the crowbar on the front doorframe.

And the night before, Maricopa's laborious re-telling of all the details and locations of her three home deliveries: the first two,

upstairs, with midwives; the last one, downstairs, alone. Maricopa lying on the livingroom carpet pulling that bloody, nameless thing from herself.

Kinky Salazar cringes just thinking about it.

"I tell the salesgirl I'm really interested in accessorizing," Maricopa says, framing her face with a plum-colored, silk blouse. "That really gets their creative juices flowing."

So this is how she does it. She takes the baby -- stroller and all -- into the dressing room with her. She gets these saleswomen running back and forth, exchanging sizes and colors. She bends their minds like cheap spoons in the direction of brooches, earrings, and matching hose for her. Her two toddlers, she instructs to play in the hallway just outside the dressing room.

Do not feel sorry for these women, Kinky Salazar thinks. These are the same women who like to wait until you're almost certainly undressed, fling open the curtain and say, 'How you doin' in there,' while the gorgeous dude waiting for his girlfriend to come out and model her sundress gets a horrifying look at you, sagging, in all your blue-veined wonder.

No mercy, Kinky Salazar is thinking, no mercy for these women.

Maricopa gets these saleswomen doing the high-step, tripping over her two small daughters who are guarding the dressing room door like peachy-faced infantrymen. The saleswomen are flinging coordinates through the curtain to Maricopa, reminding her all the time about the 25 percent markdown on everything in the store, while Maricopa,

inside, slips one more purple garment under the baby's well-powdered bottom.

"This one was really tough to get." Maricopa holds a one-piece magenta catsuit up to her body, waiting for Kinky's nod of approval.

One more week, Kinky Salazar is thinking. We are coming soon to abduct you. Didn't Nick of Nicky and the Slashers promise her that last week over the phone when she caught up with them in Toledo.

Their ad: rock band looking for an extra hand and a soprano voice. Her interpretation: someone to play two-bit keyboard parts, sing background vocals and wear a tight-fitting dress, slit-to-the-clit. She fulfilled all their requirements.

"We heard you wear a machete on stage," Nick of Nicky and the Slashers had asked her during the phone interview, sounding a little worried.

"Well, now, that was a long time ago," she had to answer. "And in Montana." Almost another country.

They couldn't refuse her. She had the extra hand -- two in fact. She had the voice (although she was careful not to mention the three extra octaves they hadn't advertised for) and yes, of course, she had the dress.

Kinky Salazar's life: Maricopa wants it. And Kinky would be more than happy to hand the whole sorry mess over to her, to trade for Maricopa's own sorry mess -- the three fatherless daughters, the monthly welfare checks, even the rusty late-model Chevy in the driveway -- if it weren't such an inequitable trade for the poor woman.

In lieu of stealing Kinky's life, then, Maricopa is filching a wardrobe, hoping that the stage life will soon follow the closet life.

"This one looks really nice on." Maricopa holds up a mauve chiffon dress, binding it around her waist to give Kinky the total effect. It does look nice. Maricopa is a beautiful woman, darkly handsome, large brown eyes, an open, trusting face.

Kinky Salazar recognizes that greenhorn quality in Maricopa's face, that willingness-to-do-whatever-is-necessary, like some tenacious strain of naivete that announces to the world, Here I am, here I am, ready to be screwed over.

At thirty-two Kinky Salazar is an old woman in her profession, but when she looks in the mirror, she doesn't fear the signs of aging as much as she fears the born-to-sell-cheeseburgers look. How hard she has worked to root that thing out of her face. Over the years she has cultivated a dark hollow look that signals in one glance, "I am no one you would care to fool with."

Maricopa's eyes are like sponges, little detail collectors. All week Kinky has withstood Maricopa's perusal, the study and absorption of all her idiosyncrasies -- movements, vocal inflections, mannerisms. All week Kinky has felt Maricopa's attention pass over her body, like a delicate probe, reviewing, reviewing. One day Kinky hears herself say something and the next day she hears the rough facsimile play back out of Maricopa's mouth, copied off of her like guitar licks off of an album.

"It's not about stealing things," Kinky Salazar wants to say to Maricopa, "or about collecting more." These words have been nestled like a good wad of snuff, inside the deep hollow of her mouth all week.

"It's about letting everything fall from you." All week she has wanted to spit the words out like something bitter and used up. But when she's tried, they've come out garbled. And she's never been able to get to the last part -- the part about how once things begin to fall, there's no way of stopping them.

"Go out and sit on the bed and close your eyes," Maricopa orders Kinky Salazar. Maricopa is fiddling with a fuchsia cowboy hat, pulling the brim down below her eyes. She grew up in a small town in the western part of the state. This is residual, no doubt, from her rodeo days.

"I'll be right out," Maricopa says. Kinky Salazar sighs, obeying her. Every day at Maricopa's house is show-and-tell.

Tonight it's a rope coiled on the floor like a sleeping snake, and a kerchief tied loosely around Maricopa's neck. Tonight it's a fuchsia cowboy boots, spit polished and a stiff Stetson, gentlemanly tipped as Kinky Salazar opens her eyes.

Maricopa picks up the rope, twisting the knotted end in her palm and begins to sing in that low voice Kinky Salazar has come to hear so much of lately, that voice, dark and hoarse that sounds like the beginnings of laryngitis but is really Maricopa's own natural voice.

Sixty-six and ninety-nine had to meet that day

Some say it was the luck of the draw

The meannest cowboy ever born

And the stubbornest horse you ever saw

The song is approximately twenty-five verses long. There are dance steps and also rope tricks which Maricopa does halfheartedly due to the lack of space in the bedroom.

Maricopa sings it, not with a country twang, but tragically in a thick, mournful voice, all these twenty-some verses about this tale of symbiosis, this ride that goes on forever -- the twisting, the bucking, the gyrations and the dust in their mouthes, and how the cowboy hangs on after each jolt the horse delivers, his left arm flapping high in the air.

Maricopa sings on, twisting and twirling the rope. It's a pity,
a darn pity, she pauses for the last verse, singing it slow and drawn out, savoring each word. The horse, from bucking, has broken its own back. The cowboy stays with the beast until the end, until the men come to shoot it.

When it's over, Maricopa sniffs and lowers her hat.

He comes silently in the middle of the night, sliding along dark corners to get to Maricopa.

Kinky Salazar can hear him in the next room, rummaging, the slight creak, the headboard softly knocking against the wall.

Maricopa's hoarse breath, taking him all in, the steady pulse, the laughter afterwards. In the morning he's always gone. Kinky Salazar wonders if she's made him up.

"I can't stand him during the day," Maricopa finally admits. Although there is something to be said for what he can do at night.

Maricopa is chopping onions, making dinner. She's casual with the knife, careless, like a person who has handled cutlery all her life. Kinky Salazar never takes up a kitchen knife. In the past when she has done so, she's been told that she looks dangerous. She doesn't want to scare the children.

The toddlers mill around Maricopa's feet. The baby is in the high chair, banging her bowl.

"Juice," the three year old says. Simple requests.

"Yes, yes." Maricopa answers.

Maricopa is easy with her children. They hang from her hips, playing with her face like friendly primates while she stirs the hamburger. They're well-trained. They don't ever push Maricopa, and they don't whine.

Perhaps it's Maricopa's choice of bedtime entertainment. Last night it was Pink Floyd. Maricopa standing in the middle of the livingroom lip syncing to "The Wall" -- What shall we use to fill the empty spaces -- the little tykes on the couch, eyes wide open, thinking she might be the pestle and they might be the mortar for all their mother's empty spaces.

They go to sleep when they're told. When Maricopa puts them down they stay down.

There is something military about Maricopa. Looking around the kitchen, Kinky Salazar finally identifies the quality she has recognized all over the house -- a strict, almost Spartan organization.

Everything in Maricopa's house has a reason for being there. There's no dust on the shelves, no knick-knacks. In her drawers, there are no half-burnt candles, or long expired coupons rolling around with the silverware. No fifty-year old casserole dishes from Grandma with the chips in the side. Kinky Salazar, relic that she is, wonders what she's doing there.

Maricopa's period is late. "That son of a bitch," she says, smelling the milk to see if it's gone sour. "He said he was shooting blanks." This is Maricopa's way of saying she can't afford another fatherless child. She can't afford the children she already has.

Appetite. There was something -- something about appetite that Kinky Salazar had meant to tell Maricopa before she left. Something about losing appetite, about letting it fall completely from you.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to get to sing for a living. To travel from town to town and not have to worry about anything." Maricopa admits this to Kinky Salazar that night just a few nights before Nicky and the Slashers are scheduled to pick her up. She admits it while chopping onions, while her babies are hanging from her like ripe fruit, while she's handling the knife casually, three weeks late from her last period.

Kinky Salazar has begun to put her finger on what unnerves her about Maricopa. There is something historyless about the woman.

"She's a little bit crazy," their one mutual friend, Dawne, had warned her when Maricopa offered Kinky a place to stay. "She's nice up front, but watch your back."

Watch your back, that was something Kinky Salazar had meant to tell Maricopa before Nicky and the Slashers worked their way up the circuit to pick her up.

Maricopa. She found the name one night while watching an old movie on television. There was an old theater in the movie, with big glass double doors, and up above was a marquee with hundreds of flashing lights all working together to form the name: The Maricopa.

"It means 'butterfly' in Spanish," Maricopa says, with a winsome smile twisting off her lips.

"That's mariposa," Kinky Salazar corrects her.

"Well, whatever," Maricopa says. Names notwithstanding, she plans to be blooming soon.

"I wanted a name that would roll right off the tongue," Maricopa tells Kinky Salazar. "Like if you went to a record store and said to the guy with the really long hair behind the counter, 'Do you have the latest Maricopa album?' He might actually get off his duff for once and go and find it for you."

Kinky Salazar laughs. She's gone through her own fair share of names. She's tried the catchy names (Lizzie Borden, Judy Judy, Typhoid Mary); she's had the corny names (Patty Link Sausage -- that one, in a band where everyone was named after a cut of meat -- Pearl Harbor); she's also tried the one-name names (Estelle, Jamaica, Francine). None of them was really quite right.

"I took a plane from Chicago to Denver," Kinky Salazar says, explaining the origin of her own name. "And there was this dude sitting next to me named Ray Salazar and I liked his looks. So when I got off the plane I stole his name."

Maricopa scowls, unhappy with the explanation, too simple, too undramatic. She twirls around, skywriting a someday review. "Salazar is a spectacle, a rock and roll meteor dropped from the heavens."

"Please, stop," Kinky Salazar says facetiously, a little embarrassed. "Between gigs" -- that's how she might describe herself if asked. What she is, she would like to say to Maricopa, is a woman with good hair, lungs as powerful as a snowblower, three suitcases full of black leather and a talent for sleeping well in moving vehicles.

The thing that has kept her going all these years is a tic in her brain, a throb at her throat, the sharp breeze of some unnameable force at her back.

"You're only as good as your last performance." That's what her high school band teacher used to say before every concert. "Uh, excuse me, Mr. Sullivan" -- over the years Kinky Salazar has had the urge to call him from various places on the road with this slight update -- "you're only as good as whoever remembers your last performance."

It was a subtle distinction, Kinky Salazar knew, but an important one.

The half-life of the note, how it exists only in that foggy universe of memory; it has always depressed her. Even the most rarefied notes, destined to fade as soon as they hit the atmosphere, born to ride that steady down curve.

There are those few, select moments she has actively nurtured to keep alive. The one night in Grand Island, no one in the audience but some dufus with a cigar sitting at the bar, grumbling about how it's too loud, how it's never this loud at the Holiday Inn, and she looking at the little space between his eyes, thinking how she'd like to drive a spike right through him, and wham this note comes out of her so perfect it almost makes a clean little cracking sound like a home run when it hits the bat.

There was a time driving across Idaho, trying to get to Boise for god only knows what reason. Four o'clock in the morning, no one awake but the coyotes and herself. Highway 86, foothill after foothill, the truck straining to rise along the peak, and the feeling that the whole thing might run away on the incline, both feet on the brake, the weight of everything at her back. And then finally hitting the plateau, the stars coming out, and the high pitch that had been ringing in her ears suddenly stopping, and the Snake River snaking along, and she along with it, and that song coming on the radio, that says, I can hear it calling me the way it used to do, and she finally understanding what "it" might possibly be.

But these were rare, intangible moments.

"Everyone changes their name for the stage," Maricopa is saying, sitting at her bureau brushing her hair. She drapes it over one eye like Streisand in the sixties. "Even Hitler," she says.

"There are no boutiques where you want to go." Kinky Salazar wants to shake Maricopa and shout. "And no babies. There's no room for babies."

Kinky Salazar is exploring virgin territory. She likes to think of herself as a frontierswomen, tough, self-reliant, willing to make the necessary sacrifices to carve out her own little niche wherever she goes. It's the only hedge she's been able to find against the gruesome half-life of the note.

Maricopa is sitting at the mirror, practicing the application of false eyelashes. "When Salazar sings, people listen." She winks at Kinky. At the very least, she has mastered the art of hyperbole.

"Goodnight," Kinky Salazar says, rising to go. She can't take any more. She pauses at the door. "Just like they used to say about Ella." She raises her beer to toast the host. "When Maricopa sings a song it stays sung."

Maricopa is steaming. She has been to the grocery store and had a fight with the manager over trading stamps.

"I paid my bill and I had them in my hand." Maricopa is furiously unpacking bags -- diapers, formula, carrots, toilet paper. "And when I went outside, the wind blew them away." Maricopa pulls

open the freezer and begins to stack peas, orange juice, pork chops wrapped in white paper. The baby is on the floor gnawing on the saltines box.

"And when I went inside to ask for more, he didn't believe I ever had them," Maricopa says this into the freezer, teeth gritted, steam rising as she speaks. "The son of a bitch didn't believe me."

She punched him. The manager called the cops and is filing assault charges against Maricopa, mother of three, possible mother of more, coveter of trading stamps.

Kinky Salazar has heard enough. She wants to go to her room. She has just taken care of three children for one hour. She is exhausted. She rises to go, feigning a yawn.

"No," Maricopa says, "don't go." She sits down at the kitchen table. "Sometimes do you ever just feel like giving up?" she asks. She buries her head in her arms. "Did you ever want something really, really bad?"

"Sure," says Kinky Salazar, patting Maricopa's hand. At one time she wanted everything. When she was 21, she and her boyfriend used to lie in bed after making love and talk about how they were going to someday make 120 babies.

It was their hormones talking, but one night as a joke they calculated the numbers of eggs she had left, up to age 40. The number had been 247 then. It was less than half that number now.

Maricopa is holding the baby in her lap. The toddlers are patting her arms, patting her legs, stroking her hair, trying to

comfort her. "Sometimes I just feel like handing them over to my mother and being done with it," Maricopa says, dabbing her eyes with a kleenex. "Sometimes," she pauses and looks into Kinky's eyes, "I'm afraid I might hurt them."

Kinky Salazar sees now that staying here was a big mistake. Her presence is only confusing things. Instead of her real life, what Maricopa imagines is some garish display of lights and colors.

Maricopa does not see what Kinky Salazar has had to drop along the way -- the parents who didn't approve, the boyfriends who couldn't wait, pets, plants, friends, apartments, money, her 143 (at last count) precious eggs that have been spread far and wide across the continent, wasted.

Even her sense of humor is gone. She lost it, near as she can remember, somewhere between Salt Lake City and Provo going south on I-15. The change was subtle at first, hardly noticeable, like gaining five pounds: all of a sudden everything starts to feel a little tight.

It happened, she likes to imagine, just as it happens in Gold Card commercials: the busy exec leaves his case on top of a rented sedan, gets in and speeds off. In the wake of his burnoff the briefcase smashes to the ground, and all those infinite lines of credit spill out onto the pavement, irretrievable.

Kinky Salazar is hoping that Nicky and the Slashers are going west. She's thinking of searching the ditches.

"Nicky, dude." Kinky Salazar phones The Slashers later in Peoria to check on their progress. In the background is the sound of a television, a blow dryer, a woman laughing. She wonders how many females she will have to clear out of the way.

Wife, or no, Kinky Salazar prefers guitarists. It's not a matter of love, or desire, or even taste so much as a question of strategy. In three weeks, she will be sleeping with Nick of Nicky and the Slashers. In five weeks, she will be warning Adolpho the lead singer to move over. In two months, she'll be using all three octaves, a full Slasher, no longer an accessory. The takeover will be amicable. She won't even need her machete.

"Just wondering if you forgot about me," Kinky Salazar breathes into the receiver.

"Never, baby, never," Nick of Nicky and the Slashers says passionately, a little drunk. "We would never forget about you."

Picture your body blooming like a weapon, she should be saying to Maricopa.

Maricopa has been giving livingroom performances.

It happens in the afternoons when the truants from high school have a few hours to kill before they can go home. They come to Maricopa's for a beer and a joint and a little bit of music. Most days it's Maricopa's own strange, unearthly music. Maricopa standing tall behind her synthesizer, the high priestess of the absurd.

"Music for Narcoleptics" is the working title of the album. It features Maricopa's rambling one-note synth lines that sound like Gregorian chant run through a hand-held band saw, now moaning, now plunging low, now screeching higher than the ear can hear.

Kinky Salazar brings out her guitar one day to jam but soon finds that Maricopa is impossible to accompany. She doesn't know the minor scale, she doesn't know the major scale. She only knows this wild wailing inside her own head and the schizophrenic scat that goes with it. "Plastic yellow clouds/plastic yellow clouds/covering up my windows today."

"It sounds like Black Sabbath on acid," one of the truants, eyes glazed over, leans into Kinky Salazar and whispers.

Later, Maricopa turns on the stereo and lip syncs to Nina Hagen's guttural German rendition of "White Punks on Dope." She puts on the live version of Deep Purple's "Highway Star" and plays air guitar to the ten-minute solo, leaning backwards manipulating her fingers along an imaginary neck, kneeling on one knee, grimacing along with the sixteenth notes.

When she gets really warmed up she plugs in her Mr. Microphone and sings passionately along with Patti Smith records ("because the night belongs to lovers") and later Pat Benatar.

She tries to hand the Mr. Microphone over to Kinky. "Oh, no," Kinky Salazar begs off, "I only sing for money."

Maricopa leans into the face of the nearest tipsy teenager. "You're a heartbreaker," she wimpers, nicely blowtorching the "h".

She purses her lips in a vintage Pat Benatar pout, takes a teen by the chin, and sings, "dreammaker, lovetaker, don't you mess around with me." On this last "me" she motions toward herself a la Shirley Temple.

The crowd loves her. She gets lots of applause, rave reviews.

Well, you're ready for Las Vegas anyway, Kinky Salazar wants to say to her later that night while packing. Nicky and the Slashers are due to arrive tomorrow and she wants to be ready for them. But before she goes, Maricopa wants her opinion.

"It was a performance not without its charms," Kinky Salazar says carefully. Maricopa sits on the bed, hanging on every word.

What does it matter what I think? Kinky Salazar wonders. I am no expert, no fine example. And besides, within a week the whole thing will be a fiction anyway, tailored to Maricopa's designs.

Kinky Salazar can smell it. This is one of those moments in life that gets away from you, becomes a monster, produces ravenous offspring.

Like the time she drank one innocent little shot of Quervo with some Joe in a bar in Kansas. A simple procedure -- she slams the shot, he uses the salt and lemon, she calls him a wimp for needing it.

Next time she goes back to Kansas, he's there at the bar asking her does she remember the time they downed the whole bottle?

And the next time she gets back to that flat, weather-beaten state, she imagines, the story will have compounded further,

multiplied exponentially. By that time, maybe she'll have drunk several Joes under the table, taken off all her clothes and done the Tango. Maybe they'll have gone to an all-night party and dropped acid. Who knows? Maybe she'll even have had one of the Joe's baby.

Any promo, even bad promo is good for you. Somebody taught her that once. Kinky Salazar never discourages a little fictionalizing.

"Can I try this on?" Maricopa picks a black, leather bustier dress out of Kinky Salazar's suitcase. It's shorter than short. Her last guitar player used to say it unplugged his sinuses whenever she wore it on stage.

"Go ahead," she says, handing Maricopa the belt and the spiked wrist bands that go with it.

Of course, she's violently beautiful in it -- her sleek long arms, her bare muscular shoulders. Sitting on the bed she exudes that sweet, malignant odor of sex.

"Everyone tells me how I've made my bed," Maricopa says, playing with the stitching on the spread. "And how now I have to learn to live with it." She smiles tenderly, like a lover. "But I still wish it was me going tomorrow instead of you."

He is there, standing in the doorway in the middle of the night. It is the unnaturalness of the silence that wakes her, the hush of someone watching, the stillness of someone holding his breath that causes her to start out of bed.

She has been dreaming about the knife again. How it traces a neat, little path along her belly, opening her up like a sardine can. He's gone before she can reach him, down the steps and out the door.

She follows the light to the bathroom where she finds blood everywhere: on the floor, in the bathtub, dark viscous pools of maroon.

Worried, she checks the girls' bedroom. The toddlers are tossed but sleeping, rosy and warm, in bunk beds. In a crib in the corner, the baby is breathing lightly. Her eyes are open with the vacancy of an infant. She quietly watches as Kinky Salazar leans over her in the dark.

Kinky Salazar traces with her finger the smooth strands of new hair. Lifting the baby into her arms, she cups the soft head, tender like an egg, in her hand.

This fragile membrane, Kinky Salazar thinks, we are all one thin layer away from disaster.

Maricopa is lying awake in bed when Kinky Salazar checks on her. A towel is pinned around her torso like a diaper. She is drawn and colorless except for the dark nipples that rest like pinches of nutmeg on the whiteness of her breasts.

"It's going to be okay," Maricopa says, smiling weakly. "We took care of everything."

She pats Kinky's hand. "Everything," she says again.

Kinky Salazar goes downstairs. There will be no more sleep for her tonight. She sets the table for breakfast, putting out the bowls and spoons and the girls' favorite cereal, making fresh orange juice.

She goes upstairs and makes her bed, zips her bags shut for the last time and manhandles them down the stairs.

Kinky Salazar takes her suitcases outside and sets them on the landing of Maricopa's front steps.

The sun will be up soon. She sits outside in the darkness and thinks about the headlights of Nicky and the Slasher's truck -- those twin meteors -- racing madly toward her in the night.

RIDING SHOTGUN WITH QUEST THROUGH IOWA
TALKING ABOUT ALL THINGS INEVITABLE

This musicians' life -- play until one,
pack up, get paid, send the dancers home

drunk, sweaty, clinging to each other.

On the long way home I ride shotgun with Quest,

helping keep watch over the night. His talk
turns to women and death, his version of

all things inevitable. He is not so afraid
of the final embrace as the moment before,

the arms stretched out to us, the looking
into the eyes of it. In the middle of this dark

night, we agree to trust it, the good faith
of this road running beneath us, allowing it

to find our next mile and our next, having faith
in its infinite supply of flashing white lines.

Like some horizontal score, this reeling road
is the canvas we write ourselves upon.

How we strive, I say, all this movement
and yet we stand so still in the landscape

of our own lives. By the glow of the dashboard,
Quest's flat profile warns me not to clamp

RIDING SHOTGUN WITH QUEST THROUGH IOWA
TALKING ABOUT ALL THINGS INEVITABLE -2

my cerebral cortex too long around that concept,
lest the cobwebs catch me. We stop for pops

and pees and finding ourselves on the map. This
is the heartland, some guy at the truck stop

boasts. Make no mistake, this is Iowa, green
and sweet, the land my great-grandparents coveted

from the windows of their passing train enroute
to Dakota, their own harsh, barren destination,

where my great-grandmother upon finally seeing
her untilled homestead fell to her knees

and cried "It's all earth and sky," where
every morning at the first strains of light

farmers like my father still rise to milk
the cows and every night vapor lights burn

in yards. Not for me that life. I fixed
my eye on the horizon, set myself to reel

madly across this continent, sleeping through
the light, keeping watch over this dark

night. Flying through Iowa past cornfields
and silos, the two-storied houses

RIDING SHOTGUN WITH QUEST THROUGH IOWA
TALKING ABOUT ALL THINGS INEVITABLE -3

our dancers have gone to sleep in, I doze,
wake, doze, to find Quest, hands on the wheel,

trying to outdistance the road. Five o'clock
passing a farm yard I wake to see my father

step out to do the early morning chores.
His shadow, bending to pet the dog becomes

my brother. My watch done, I surrender myself
to the twilight of sleep. This is the time

of accidents, the ones we'll never see.
We pass through knowing that soon the sun

will show its awful face, that soon
even our headlights will be worthless.

THE HORIZONTAL LIFE

She would never have lost her virginity, this girl that I was, if the grain elevator had not burned down. Not that she was saving her virginity for anything special. In fact, she saw her virginity as a kind of filmy substance, a dying skin that needed to be cast off. She was not the stitch-in-time/penny-saved kind, not the roll-the-extra-string-into-a-ball-and-save-it type of young woman that fiction writers who write stories about midwestern girls like to create.

No, if you had to classify her, you would say that she was a spender, that she was all thin limbs and long hair, that she was fifteen, and that she had that walk down cold -- the walk of someone who doesn't believe in life after twenty.

The elevator burning down was an ironic event in her life. Not that the girl would have perceived it as such -- since at that point she had never even heard of irony -- and she, in fact, would not hear about irony for a good many years, long after she had ceased to be herself and was well on the way to becoming somebody else who would eventually, by some strange twist of fate, become me.

It's fair to say that this version of the girl that I was, was working on more basic concepts. Small things, like trying to get people to call her "Kate" instead of the more childish "Kathie" and finding someone to lose her virginity to.

By the time we see her here, watching the elevator burn down, she has already tried a number of things. She has tried French kissing, and seen plenty of window fog. She herself has done some heavy breathing. She's had her breasts nibbled, studied and stroked, and explored an endless variety of back seats, quietly undoing snaps and zippers and tricky belt buckles, slipping her hand deep into the warm, moist pants of a writhing stranger.

The horizontal life has not completely eluded her.

But she has impossible standards. She does not want the tentative touch of a novice, nor does she want a clumsy farmboy. No one who wears tidewater plaid pants, smells of cow manure, and lusts more for her father's full six quarters of land than for her own slim, strong and tanned body, thank you.

She's no longer interested in shy exploration, or wonderment, or handing her carefully pruned virginity over to a husband on a wedding night. She has an itch somewhere deep inside her, in a place that she cannot even begin to direct someone to. But she doesn't simply want it scratched; she wants it vanquished. It will take an expert, someone who is as efficient as he is kind. She's looking, I like to think, for a wolf with a nice demeanor and a little bit of conscience. But whoever this man is, if he ever lived in this town, has certainly moved away.

So, discontented, this girl that I was gathers with the rest of the townspeople, and watches the grain elevator burn from the bottom to the top. The volunteer firemen -- who will not be made to do anything heroic even though it's their own carefully cultivated grain going up in flames -- know they cannot stop the fire. Sending their wild sprays flying in the air, they hope for containment and nervously watch the other elevator thirty yards away.

The grain is popping and exploding in the bin. The grain is offering itself up to the fire, rising in a black column of smoke.

Perhaps it was a small spark in the dust that started the fire, or a carelessly discarded cigarette, but now it's the very friction and substance of the grain sustaining that original spark, still to be found somewhere in the larger context of the fire, growing from yellow to orange to red, roaring and crackling in a way that the tiny spark had never dreamed of.

How quickly it goes and how little is left -- the girl that I was observes -- like a wooden match struck on its sulfur tip and left in an ashtray to burn. Already she has an eye for metaphor which, in this small town, serves only to cause her problems, since observations of this kind are usually met with a a raised eyebrow and a shake of the head. But this girl that I was does not aspire to be a poet, nor does she yearn for understanding. She has not yet even heard the word "alienation" and although she has experience^d angst, she couldn't tell you what it is.

There she is, mowing the lawn on the Fourth of July when she got her first period. See how immaculate the lines she is making -- running the mower up and down the endless length of her parents' dried up lawn -- lines perfect like a landing strip she is preparing for anyone who may pass over and decide to land. Already she is scanning the horizon for men in goggles, for the long scarves streaming from their necks. Already she is scheming quick passage out of this dusthole, this graveyard that her father has inherited from his father -- inherited, in turn, from all the fathers who came before.

When she feels that first jagged pain strike, like a crack of lightning, at her navel and bury itself deep in her pelvis, she keeps working. Through the layers of her shorts she feels it spread, the ever-widening stain, but she doesn't bother to go inside. She's not anxious to find out what has happened to her body. She looks only as far ahead as the wide expanse of her parents' unmown lawn, concentrating on finishing another long row before the afternoon sun rises too high in the sky.

She doesn't stop to say to herself "Independence Day, my ass," (being unfamiliar with the concept of irony) nor does she note the appropriateness of this word that she has heard whispered in the hallways and the school bathrooms from time to time -- this word "period" which eventually comes to punctuate every woman's life. She is not interested in semantic wordplay, this girl that I was. She is oblivious to the concept of sea change, decades away from language theory and not interested in feminine matters of any kind.

Truly this is a watershed moment in her life, but if you tried to tell her that -- about her body racing wildly along a predetermined course -- she would laugh in your face.

Later inside, no one has prepared her for this moment, yet she finds the cache of pads in the cupboard above the bathtub. She has, over the years, watched this giant blue box as it emptied and filled, emptied and filled, never understanding until this very moment the true significance of all this mysterious activity.

That Fourth of July after supper is eaten and the sunlight has waned, this girl that I was and the rest of her family go out onto the newly mown lawn. Her grandparents bring folding chairs. Her father brings a cooler. Her mother spreads a blanket, and her brother, as official torch bearer, ignites bottle rocket after bottle rocket, shooting star after shooting star for their amusement into the still night air, while the girl that I was lies down in the cool grass to watch the rockets whiz and self-destruct in mid-air, watching fountains of light hiss and spit into the sky, streams of light arcing and fanning into the shapes of delicate, exotic flowers, then slowly dissolving into the darkness, as the girl that I was and her family oooh and aaah in appreciation.

"Differences" is the way she might have described it. Slowly the girl that I was began to detect differences in herself, and between herself and her sisters. For example, she noticed that her sisters were perfectly content to schlepp around town (although she would

never have called it that since ethnic phrases had not yet been introduced into her vocabulary) in thick messy pads, destined to a lifetime of hoisting and adjusting, hoisting and adjusting.

She had only to study the group photographs from holidays, or stand in the mirror with one of her sisters, to see that they were markedly different. They were dress women, A-line and shift women; she was a hip-hugger pants, mini-skirt kind of girl, this girl that I was.

She yearned to eliminate that tell-tale lump that her hip-huggers threatened to disclose at certain times of the month. On her good days she wore the pants as they were intended, slung as low on her hips as her pelvis would allow, her flat stomach and jutting hip bones the primary attraction.

She had nightmares about the disastrous exposures that her shorter-than-short skirts might cause. At night, she wished for, dreamed of, actually lusted after a box of tampons. But the girl that I was couldn't risk buying them. Because it was a small town, with an even smaller drugstore, and because the lady behind the counter would take notice, and then by the middle of the afternoon every woman in the town would know -- the word would have spread like wildfire -- that not only had she gotten her period, but now she thought she was too good to wear pads.

The summer after the grain elevator burned down, it began to rise slowly again out of the ground, with the help of workmen who appeared in the small town as if by magic. Every day the townspeople passing the elevator stopped for a time and watched the construction workers whistle and pound away at the newly emerging structure.

He is well into the sky when she first sees him, dangling on the edge, a leather safety strap slung around his waist, his thick yellow hair blowing in the wind. He cuts a striking figure up there, with the sun blazing behind him, like a Phoenix rising triumphantly out of the ashes. This moment could be highly allusive, but it would be a lie to say that the girl sees him as anything more than shirtless, big-armed, a well-tanned hunk of fresh meat.

His name is George, although he is by no means a dragon slayer. He came to town in a blue two-toned '56 Chevy with no reverse gear and only a little left of first. Terrified of heights, but even more terrified of poverty, he overcomes his bad nerves every day, climbing the scaffolding, weak-kneed and hung over, rising higher and higher as the summer progresses.

Perhaps it's that walk of hers, that careless mad march that attracts his attention. She's crossing the railroad tracks on the way to her grandmother's house (this is no joke, she really is going to visit her grandmother) when she hears his whistle come from high above. She looks up into the glare and sees the flash of his white, white teeth.

Later at the Rec Hall where everyone goes to play pool, smoke cigarettes and eat the best thirty-five cent french fries in town,

she gets close enough to notice that his breath smells of spearmint, for he chews gum liberally, flipping it around in his mouth with his tongue as he speaks, chattering away about something she does not hear because she is concentrating so exclusively on the length and shape and firmness of his thighs.

He has showered and changed. His hair is bleached out and damp and his skin is rosy from the sun. He wears a yellow shirt stripped open to his navel, revealing a neat little nest of burnished red chest hair. Perhaps this George, this elevator man reminds the girl of a Viking warrior -- although, certainly, only on a subconscious level -- as he laughs and strokes his moustache. His lambchop sideburns are dark and wispy trailing down the sides of his face. When given the opportunity to browse, the girl that I was thinks, she is certain to find every conceivable color of hair on his body.

They talk, but they talk of nothing, George and this girl that I was, because they have no words with which to work. They have only grunts and laughs, gestures and sighs, and fragments of words that they have heard and vaguely understood, which they offer to one another now, peppering the silence that hangs between them.

When he begins his little dance, this dance he feels obliged to do to get her into his car, it comes out circuitous, a seamless blending of gestures: feigned shyness and sly innuendo intermixed with a fair share of chest pounding.

She watches this George, this second-storey man, do his little dance, knowing that it is not necessary, knowing that it was never

necessary for her own sake, but allowing it to continue, recognizing in her characteristic early wisdom that it is necessary for him to do.

As they cruise Main, he smiles at her with his immaculate wide grin and fiddles with the radio, while she studies the leathery quality of his large hands, wanting more than anything to trace with her finger the smooth long line of his distinctive nose -- the shape of which, when she encounters it later in life on the faces of other men, she comes to call an intelligent nose.

Riding along in this '56 two-tone Chevy, this girl that I was, with no reverse gear and very little left of first, is not thinking of watersheds, nor is she thinking of trailer courts or babies crying in the middle of the night. She is lighting a cigarette, bending the tip deep into the flame. Taking one slow drag, she watches the ash grow long on the tip, but she does not look for an ashtray. She leans back, just leans back in complete repose.

And even though he's a stranger in town, she doesn't bother to give him directions. So confident is she that he will find the way to get them wherever this girl that I was wants to go.

MOTORCADE

I was seven when it happened
in the second grade, but old enough
to know it was serious
when Sister Jacinta, bleary-eyed
and wrinkled, announced
that our Catholic President
had been shot. We rose,
hands over our hearts to say
the Pledge-Allegiance, then hands
together to pray the Our-Father
although, I believe, all along,
we understood we were praying
for the soul and not the man.
What I remember most is Ronnie Mitzel
sneezing through everything --
a tin of pepper on his desk,
for what I do not know,
perhaps show-and-tell,
but some dark itching powder
had gotten into his nose.
He could not help himself.
And somehow I've always known
that he enjoyed it,
the body betraying itself
at that very solemn moment.
He was always the flamboyant one,
class clown, moved away
after graduation, like all of us.
I never heard from him again
until last year when I saw
his obituary in the paper:
still single, his address
listed as San Francisco. Bodies
are flowing back to us from places

MOTORCADE -2

less parochial. How immune
we believed ourselves to be
so far from the swirling locus
of events. There are moments
like these in history
that hold themselves up
like great roaring surfaces,
too large to reveal anything,
but that one single frame
from the movie
of our own lives. That night,
we watched it on the news:
the motorcade
running the gauntlet,
President Kennedy alive
and smiling then dead,
alive and smiling,
then dead, Jackie
in her pillbox hat
and waist-coat, crawling
onto the trunk of the convertible,
almost reaching the arms
of the secret service man, almost
going backward for one long moment,
while all else rushed forward,
then thinking better
and returning to the back seat,
to her already dead husband,
the motorcade picking up speed
and accelerating madly
out of view of the camera.

GETTING WINGS

It was on a Friday night, after all the lights were off and Pop had locked the door and gone to bed that I turned to my older sister Trudy in the bunk bed beside mine and told her about all the trouble I was having in third grade, and especially about all the trouble I was having with Sister Mary Albertina.

"Crap," Trudy said. "Pure crap." That's what Sister Mary Albertina was giving me.

"If she gets that close to you again, and she hands you that kind of crap," Trudy said, flashing her strong white teeth in the dark, "just bite her."

Biting was Trudy's answer for everything. When she was in third grade, Trudy had bitten Sister Mary Albertina -- she told Mom and Pop later -- just to let the big hunk of nun know who was boss. In class whenever Sister Mary Albertina handed a paper back to me or walked past my desk with that slow, careful step of hers, I tried to get a good look at her pale white wrist hoping for a peek at the jagged half moon Trudy's teeth had left on her skin.

Trudy had a charm, I figured, or some kind of guardian angel, because nothing much happened to her that time she bit Sister Mary Albertina. Sister Paula, the principal, expelled her from school for three days, and Mom and Pop had to come in with papers showing, I don't know what -- that she didn't have rabies or something. There

was a general stink around the house for a couple weeks, but the fact is Sister Mary Albertina did leave her alone after that.

Trudy thought she was an expert on everything. I knew she was mostly full of it, but still I liked to stay up late on Friday nights and listen to her yap on about all the boy stuff, and all the mom and pop stuff, and all the nun stuff she claimed to know. I sat through the boring parts -- like what she suspected the inside of a boy's mouth might feel like -- just waiting for her to get to the good stuff.

It was on that Friday night, after all the lights were off and Pop had locked the door and gone to bed that Trudy warned me to watch my step around Sister Mary Albertina. It being a confirmed fact that nuns could fly -- she cautioned me in the dark -- only God knew what else they were capable of.

"I'm sure." I hissed. "Nuns cannot fly."

You would never be able to tell it, she explained, because of the long skirts they always wore, but if you watched real close, real close, you could see that they just glided a few inches off the ground, just barely dusting the floor with their hems.

"And this is why," she whispered, "they can sneak up on you so quiet, just like death, and you'd never even know it."

"Get outta here," I said, skeptical.

As Trudy went on to the next subject and the next and the next, an image stuck in my mind of Sister Mary Albertina in her long, loose habit, flapping her arms in the wind.

Not all of Trudy's information was questionable. She was the first person to tell me the real truth about Sister Paula and Father Schwartz -- about how they had barely managed to escape from behind some place called the iron curtain. Sometimes when Trudy talked about Father Schwartz and Sister Paula's miraculous escape from behind the iron curtain, I envisioned a heavy curtain strung clear across the continent of Europe, made up of every discarded grey wool coats in the western world.

I had heard of the iron curtain before. Some Sundays at the end of mass, Father Schwartz made announcements about the poor people still stuck behind that iron curtain and how they needed our old clothes and some food, and Bibles and even money if we could spare it, because once you got behind that iron curtain, you couldn't just pull the strings and open it. You were stuck there for good.

Trudy knew other useful nun stuff, too. That night she told me how all nuns had an x-ray-o device concealed behind their high, white wimples, and that if you let nun's eyes lock on to you for more than eight seconds, they could read your thoughts and easily tell if you had done all your homework, or just parts of it, and they might even be able to tell if you had unconfessed sins on your soul and everything.

This was usually not a problem because nuns were generally pretty forgiving by nature. But, she added, this was definitely something to look out for when dealing with Sister Mary Albertina.

Advice came from all quarters in those days. "Just be quiet, listen to your teacher, and make sure you do your homework," my pop said. He had escaped St. Anthony of Padua twenty years before by graduating and I took that as a hopeful sign: someone had made it through.

"You'll be in high school before you know it," he said encouragingly.

My mother seconded this, warning me that she couldn't be taking time off from her nifty job at Fine Fashions For Women every time one of us had some little problem or another with our teacher.

Everyone had ideas about how I might get through third grade, but still, there was this very big problem I was having with Sister Mary Albertina of the soft-step, the exact-o-eyes, Sister Mary Albertina of the whack-a-day ruler.

It was my lefthandedness that had first attracted her attention.

"Audrey," she said in a high, inquiring voice, "are you aware that you are holding your pencil incorrectly?" She drifted close to me and snatched the pencil out of my left hand. She fixed the pencil just so between the fingers of my right hand. With her hand over mine we traced the letter a into my Big Chief tablet. But even with Sister Mary Albertina's help, my right-handed a still looked more like a wobbly box with a squiggly tail than any real a I'd ever seen.

After that in class I took notes with my right hand whenever Sister Mary Albertina was watching. Then when she turned to the blackboard, I switched to my left hand and wrote like mad.

"Sister," Janie Hilzendger said one day, raising her hand. "Audrey's using her left hand again." I couldn't believe what a creep Janie Hilzendger had turned out to be. She lived next door to my grandmother. She was the first person my own age I had ever met, and back in those days, I seemed to remember, she had been a pretty nice kid.

In fact, I still remembered going to her sixth birthday party and bawling like crazy because she had turned six and I was still five and I thought she was going to keep getting older -- seven, eight, nine, ten -- and I would stay five forever; that's how much I had liked her back then. And here she was, nine, and already ratting on me.

"Now, Audrey," Sister Mary Albertina cautioned, fixing her eyes on that pencil snuggled in my left hand, "we've been through this before."

She glided down the aisle to my desk and hung over me like a big black bird. "Put your hands on the desk," she ordered. "Hands on the desk." And when I did she brought that big wood ruler down on my knuckles with a crack that sent a shock of light up my arms and into my head like stars exploding.

"Now, class," she said cheerfully, reeling around. The ruler resting neatly in the crook of her arm like a drum majorette's baton. "We were working on the letter n. Yes?"

And as Sister Mary Albertina made her way to the front of the room, Janie Hilzendger, my first best friend ever, turned to me and stuck out her tongue.

I lived for recess that year of the Sister Mary Albertina.

Every morning and afternoon, I waited for the recess bell to ring the recess song that only I could hear. The words to the song were about dodge ball and softball and tag and fifteen minutes of fresh air away from Sister Mary Albertina. When winter came, Father Schwartz set to work making an ice skating rink for us.

Perhaps while he worked on the rink -- shoveling gravel from a wheelbarrow and packing it into a high ridge, and later, when that was finished, running a long hose, puffing in the cold while the rink filled up to the brim with water -- he imagined us skating in perfect circles inside that oblong rink: well-behaved, rosy-cheeked, with our mufflers flapping behind us in the wind.

But within a few days after the rink was finished, the boys had started a brutal, fast-paced game of hockey on one end of the rink, and the older, stronger girls like Trudy had invented a ruthless game of crack-the-whip on the other end. Those of us too young or wimpy to do either, skated in wobbly circles in the center.

"Be careful, there." The sisters walked and fretted around the edges of the rink in their long frock coats pretending not to know how to skate, yelling warnings and shaking their heads in disgust over the dangerous games.

"Pretty sneaky," Trudy said of the nuns, knowing full well that they could have just glided along the surface if they had really wanted to.

The only nun who ventured onto the ice was Sister Gemma, Trudy's seventh grade teacher, and nobody minded her because she was young and pretty and a really good skater.

"Very good, Princess," Sister Gemma would say this to me every time I managed to stay on my feet for more than two crummy minutes. She used to call me by that name, "Princess," and I'm sure I never heard her call anyone else by it.

Sister Gemma glided over the ice like magic, her hands floating around her in even strokes, her long sleeves trailing after her in the breeze. No matter how I tried, I could never match Sister Gemma's even strokes. I moved slowly on the ice, my whole body stiff from the cold.

Winters were like that at St. Anthony of Padua: hell at twenty below zero and no excuse good enough for staying inside. And Trudy was never any help.

"Audrey. Oh, Au-d-rey," she yelled to me one day from the top of the whip. "Grab on!" And when I did, she sped up the whip and sent me flying across the rink like a puck into the middle of the hockey game, right into the lap of the goalie, Robbie Thompson.

"Thanks a lot," I said to Trudy that day after recess when I found her outside her classroom taking off her skates.

"You've got to learn to jump in," Trudy said, always the one with advice, always in the middle of everything. Then she said something that really got to me, she said, "You're such a wimp sometimes I'm ashamed to claim you as my sister."

"Oh, and what about you," I said, really mad now, trying to decide if I should say the one thing that I knew would really piss her off, because Trudy was not the kind of person you crossed without really planning for it. (One time at home when I wanted to watch Channel Five and she wanted to watch Channel Twelve, she slugged me so hard I saw swirling circles of light.)

"Oh, oh, oh!" I decided to go for it, faking like I was going to faint, moving carefully out of range of her fists. "The needle." I swooned imitating her. "The needle, not the needle."

"Shaddup!" Trudy rose to her feet, tall and unsteady on her skates. "Just you shaddup," she said, trying to catch me as I ran laughing down the hallway back to my classroom.

This was guaranteed to make her mad: whenever I reminded her of the dumb way she had acted the day the community health nurse had come to give us our polio vaccinations. Trudy had only one weakness, and that was needles.

I hadn't seen it with my own eyes that day, because we had been vaccinated by grade -- first grade through eighth filing out of our classrooms in a single neat row into the library -- but I had heard it.

"Now class, this won't hurt a bit," Sister Mary Albertina assured us as we got into line. "It will just feel like a little tap," she said, smacking her open palm with the ruler.

The community health nurse was there somewhere out of sight at the end of that long line, I knew this because I heard her big air gun going "poof" every few seconds, the "poof" getting louder each time she vaccinated the next person in the line, the line between me and her getting shorter with every "poof." She had a powerful determination, it appeared, to shoot everyone with that big air gun before leaving the premises.

It was later after we were back in our classroom feeling bruised, brave, and proud of our bandages, that I heard Trudy kicking and screaming down the hallway.

Maybe it was just the sound of that gun popping off all morning right next to their classroom that finally got to those seventh graders, but by the time they wormed their way into the library, palms were sweating and teeth were chattering. A couple seventh graders just went white and fainted dead away. One girl threw up in the hallway and then three kids standing directly behind her had to throw up too.

And then came Trudy.

They say she almost tore the arm off of that poor community health nurse, and that the air gun wouldn't make the little "poof" sound anymore after she ripped the cord out of the socket.

All the sisters were there waiting, remembering Trudy's fear of needles from past years. Even Father Cooney, the young new priest had been enlisted to help.

After some kicking and biting, they snagged her arms and legs and dragged her, screaming, to Sister Paula's office where the nurse had to give Trudy a real shot with a real needle since she had broken the little gun that went "poof."

Trudy wasn't too popular with the eighth graders after that either. "Because of you, we had to get real shots." Mad eighth graders would dredge up this old complaint every once in a while on the playground.

"Hey," Trudy would say, bouncing like a boxer on the balls of her feet, "it took four nuns and a priest to keep me down."

Sometimes I liked to imagine what it looked like that day in Sister Paula's office: Trudy, like some wildcat out of a Saturday morning cartoon, rubberlike, stretched into all the corners of Sister Paula's office, peeling the wallpaper off the walls with her fingernails, just to avoid that one crummy little shot.

Even though I always told Trudy I was embarrassed by the way she had made such a fool of herself over that vaccination, I secretly admired her. I liked the way Sister Mary Albertina went a little stiff that day when we heard Sister Paula out in the hallway yelling, "the teeth, look out for the teeth."

At the very least, I thought, Trudy had made some kind of lasting impression.

Fridays were multiplication table day.

Six, seven and eight always stumped me and Sister Mary Albertina knew it. That's why she waited until then to call on me every Friday morning when she tested the class on the times tables.

She usually called on Paula Welder early because Paula was really smart, but just shy and never did well when she was forced to speak up in class. There were some people that Sister Mary Albertina just never called on any more. Gary Johnson, for example, who sat in the front right corner and just about waggled his arm off of his body trying to get her to call his name. She never even looked at him when she got up past the fives.

Fridays were hell for me because of the numbers six, seven and eight. I dressed carefully on those mornings, staring at the clothes in my closet for a long time, trying to figure out what looked like a lucky outfit to wear.

But today I had brought extra help: all five of my troll dolls. My four back-ups which I kept in my desk, and Amy, my best troll doll -- the one with the orange hair -- I kept in my lap. I stroked Amy's orange hair for a long time that morning concentrating on having luck where numbers were concerned.

"And now Audrey, six times seven." Sister Mary Albertina fixed her eyes on me after she had worked her way through the first part of the multiplication table. "Think."

Six, I thought, six. It was that mad swirl into nothingness that always confused me.

But I knew that six times six was thirty-six, that was easy to remember. So I counted on my fingers from there -- thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine -- not quite making it before Sister Mary Albertina, who had been a third grade teacher since the beginning of eternity, sensed that finger-counting was in progress and came over to my desk.

"Audrey, hands on the desk, no counting." Sister Mary Albertina hovered over me menacingly, her ruler growing larger with every heartbeat. And this is when I threw my hands onto the desk so fast that Amy went flying out of my lap, onto the floor, landing snoot up under Sister Mary Albertina's floating black skirt.

What Amy saw under that skirt that day, I'll never know. But I've always imagined whirring engines, little cooling fans.

"What's this?" Sister Mary Albertina bent over picking up Amy, staring at her like she was funny smelling, obviously not appreciating her engaging smile and her cute little pug nose.

"She's got more in her desk," Janie Hilzendger offered, stroking her own long silky ponytail.

"Audrey, open your desk." Sister Mary Albertina loomed large, her ruler weaving and bobbing. "Let me see."

When I lifted the lid of my desk, there they were, my whole family of trolls, sleeping, trusting as vermin in a little nest in the corner, waiting to be taken prisoner by Sister Mary Albertina, never fully conscious of the fact that they had been betrayed by Janie Hilzendger.

"That was a crummy thing to do," I told Janie Hilzendger later in the bathroom while we were washing our hands before lunch.

"Momma says they're bad, devil stuff," she simpered.

Man, I couldn't believe what a rotten kid Janie Hilzendger had turned out to be.

"You shouldn't have taken them to school." That night at supper Trudy yelled at me for letting Sister Mary Albertina take the trolls for ransom.

Trudy was pissed because two members of the troll family -- the blue-haired one and the lime-green one -- belonged to her. Sister Paula now held them all hostage somewhere deep in her many drawers. Trudy never took care of the trolls, she never brushed their hair or played with them, or put them to bed at night. She never even named them. I had always considered them mine.

"If I have to go in there, and if I have to talk to them," my mom threatened.

God forbid, I thought, you might have to leave Fine Fashions for Women for even one instant. But I didn't say it. I just sat there with my head down, moving my carrots around my plate.

"She'll work it out," Pop called from the livingroom. He always ate real fast, went to the bathroom and made a big stink, then settled into his La-Z-Boy to read the paper. Pop was like that, just like clockwork.

"I don't have any time to go in there and talk to them," Mom said, quiet this time, under her breath, in case we hadn't heard her the first time.

"She'd better work it out," Trudy said, emptying her plate into the garbage, waiting until Mom wasn't looking, then making a slashing motion with her finger across her throat, pointing at me to let me know that's what was going to happen to me if I didn't get her trolls back.

Examples of the most perfect cursive letters ever written circled the room above the chalkboard. They hovered like angels coming in for a landing, and we were supposed to swing and curve our pencils exactly according to their graceful movements.

Sister Mary Albertina was becoming concerned about my cursive, especially my letter L. I couldn't get the loopdy-loop to go right, and my L was beginning to look like a kite that had been out in the wind too long. My P was imperfect, too, as were my F, Q, and Z. It seemed I could never get the little tails to dip below the line the way she liked.

But what was really troubling Sister Mary Albertina the most was the very disturbing habit I had of mistaking d for b. She knew this was a sign of real bad things to come.

"You must practice," Sister Mary Albertina said crisply to me and to the rest of the class, "and practice and practice and practice your letters." She stood over me waving and waving her ruler like a band conductor. A whole symphony's worth of perfectly-drawn letters flew from the end of her ruler and floated through the air like beautiful notes playing in time to her movements.

"See here," Sister Mary Albertina spied over Janie Hilzendger's shoulder. Janie was sitting at her desk forming letters with a vengeance, her body straining with purpose, her tongue conspiring to shape the letter she was forming.

"Now this is perfect penmanship." Sister Mary Albertina picked up Janie Hilzendger's Big Chief tablet and waved it like a flag for all the class to see.

This is when I decided to raise my hand and tell Sister Mary Albertina I was feeling sick like I might throw up. I had been planning on being sick all week, waiting for the right moment, and now I actually was feeling a little sick so I didn't feel so bad about lying.

There was no sick room at St. Anthony of Padua and no nurse. So if you got sick, you just had to lie down on a cot behind a curtain at the end of the hall right next to Sister Paula's office, and hope that somebody came to pick you up, or that you got better before the day was over.

Sister Paula was not in her office. She was, as usual, teaching her eighth graders in the classroom on the other end of the long

hallway. I sat on the cot behind that curtain for a few minutes trying to work up a sick look, thinking about the open and inviting door to Sister Paula's office.

The trolls, I knew, were entrenched somewhere deep inside, waiting for rescue, for reinforcements, for emergency provisions. I looked around the corner and saw no one, just a long empty hallway, chalkboards squeaking, brains working, learning in progress behind each closed door.

I went into Sister Paula's office. First I looked for the trolls in the closet, but I found nothing in there but nun stuff: clean, white wimples, long black robes and ultra-polished, pointy black shoes. A nun's belt hung on a nail inside the closet. All the nuns wore these kinds of belt around their waists so I had seen them before, but not close up. Close up this belt looked like a rosary for a giant -- extra long and sturdy, made from heavy-duty, industrial strength beads.

A rosary, it seemed to me, for a big-time kind of sinner. On the end of each belt hung a large metal crucifix with Jesus still on the cross, crown of thorns still piercing his head, looking sort of seasick, I thought, probably from that constant swinging to the motion of nuns' hips.

On the other side of the closet was some priest stuff: stiff white neck pieces, a whole stack of sea-green Baltimore catechisms and a hollow wooden cross just like the one Mom and Pop had hanging over their bed at home.

I had played with that cross lots of times at home, so I knew that if you slipped Jesus, suffering as he was, off the cross, there was a secret compartment inside where tiny candles and vials of holy water and oil were kept for the priest to use in the event that he happened to stop by your house when somebody was dying and he didn't have all the stuff he needed to perform extreme unction.

Sister Paula's office was full of compartments like this, and closets and files and desk drawers. I looked around the room, trying to figure out where to look next. I tried to listen, to see if I could hear the trolls squealing, or singing, or snoring -- listening for whatever sounds trolls might make in captivity -- but all I heard was the sound of someone coming down the hallway.

I made it back behind the curtain and onto the cot by the time Sister Paula and two eighth grade boys came around the corner. I didn't hear Sister Paula of course -- she was silent as silk -- but luckily the two eighth grade boys with her had scuffed their way down the hallway, seemingly because they were being recruited for something they didn't want to do.

"Are you feeling not so well." Sister Paula looked around the curtain, clipping off her words in a heavy German accent. I tried to get a sick look on my face by thinking about Baltimore catechisms.

She sat down on the cot beside me. "You are not hot." She pushed my bangs back and felt my forehead.

I sat up. "I'm feeling better," I admitted to Sister Paula. She had an accent just like my grandmother's. I had trouble lying to her.

"Good for you," Sister Paula said, getting up. "We are having a movie this afternoon, you do not want to miss."

One of the eighth grade boys wheeled the cart with the movie projector out of Sister Paula's office. The other carried the record player. They came back in a few minutes for the projection screen. Just then the recess bell sang the recess song.

"You just maybe need some fresh air," Sister Paula advised, helping me off the cot.

Outside on the ice, I tried to skate in smooth, clean circles, feeling the cool air rush by my cheeks. Sister Gemma was teaching me to skate. Every recess we worked on something new.

"Good," she said, "real good," every time I mastered something. First she had fixed my stroke, showing me how to keep my ankles steady and tight. Next she taught me little tricks, like how to skate on one leg with my hands straight out like I was an angel floating on a Christmas tree.

Today she was showing me how to skate backwards. She took both of my hands first, like we were dancing. She skated backwards for a little while to show me how easy it could be. The wind blew, wrapping her cloak around her; it hugged her like a broken umbrella.

Sister Gemma had clear beautiful eyes. I looked her straight into them as we skated, not even minding if she was x-ray-o-ing me.

Then she swung me around, still holding on, and I was skating backwards. "Try to imagine you're making figure eights with your feet," she said, holding onto my hands.

"There," she said, as I began to get it, moving on my own power. "Perfect." She released my hands as I floated away, my blades squiggling along the cool surface of the ice, going backwards on my own.

I was skating like this, on my own power, Sister Gemma skating along beside me, when I heard the scream from the other end of the rink: a scream that was cold and piercing.

It rose and echoed in the crisp air like the sound of a dog barking in a backyard blocks away. I recognized it immediately as Trudy's voice. I turned to see the confusion at the far end of the rink -- people skating and milling in a circle.

Sister Gemma got there before me. On the other end of the rink, we found Trudy wrecked on the ice. By now she had found words. She was hollering, "She spiked me! The creep spiked me!"

Sister Gemma knelt beside her. Blood was everywhere, all over Sister Gemma's skirt, all over her sleeves. She held her hand over Trudy's knee, blood seeping through her fingers onto the ice.

They got Trudy off the ice somehow, moaning and crying and kicking. They carried her to the cot outside Sister Paula's office.

Sobbing and shrieking, some seventh grade girls explained that they had been playing crack-the-whip when the back of someone's blade had gone up into Trudy's knee.

Sister Paula called the nurse. She worked to stop the bleeding. When the community health nurse finally came she looked at the knee, shaking her head. It would hurt a while, she assured us, but it wasn't as serious as it looked.

"I'm going to give you something for the pain," she said to Trudy. I watched at the end of the cot, staring at the big meaty hole the skate had left in Trudy's kneecap.

"This might make you a little groggy." The nurse stuck a little orange pill on the tip of Trudy's tongue, handing her a tiny cup of water to wash it down.

"And this is for infection," the nurse said, tipping a vial of brown liquid in the air jabbing a long, clear needle into the rubber stopper.

This, I thought, is a fearless woman.

I watched as the community health nurse held that long needle full of brown ooze in the air, looking for air bubbles. I watched as she rolled Trudy's limp body half over and pulled down her stretch pants a bit to get a clear shot at Trudy's rump. I watched as she poked the needle into my sister without so much as a whimper or a swear word from Trudy.

Then the nurse washed and dried her hands, humming all the while the tune of a little song I had never heard before. As she packed all of her things into her tiny black bag, she stopped humming on occasion and "tsk," "tsk" a few times, thinking, I assumed, about the dangers of crack-the-whip.

That afternoon, the entire school gathered in the cafeteria for the movie.

It wasn't actually a movie, it was really a slide show, with a record that made a little "beep" sound every time you were supposed to advance to the next slide.

It was called One Soldier's Experience and the sisters showed it every year to all the classes. It was the only school event that Father Schwartz ever attended, standing in the back of the room close to the doorway. It was my third year seeing it, so I was starting to get the hang of what it was about.

The needle skipped and cracked along the surface of the record when it touched down, and finally the soldier's voice began. The little "beep" came, then "beeped" again, as map after map flashed across the projection screen.

First, there were maps of Germany and Europe, then maps of Japan and the South Pacific. The soldier talked about fighting in the war and being taken prisoner somewhere in the South Pacific for 239 days. When he was telling us this, picture after picture appeared on the screen -- long flanks of troops, marching in long uneven rows.

The soldier started talking about those 239 days. Pictures appeared on the screen of sinking boats and burning airplanes. The soldier said that their captors were cruel, starving them. He said that some of the soldiers died along the trail as they walked to the prisoner camp, and they weren't even allowed to stop and pick up the dying men.

Pictures of hollow-eyed men appeared on the projection screen. Their uniforms looked like rags hanging off of their bodies. They clung to each other for support, staring back at us from the projection screen.

Then the soldier talked about how they had managed to survive those 239 days.

"Gus Friedman," the soldier said, "imagined a tree house in his back yard." Whenever things got too bad, he said, "Gus Friedman imagined himself sitting in that tree house, safe from everything."

Lots of people didn't make it for all 239 days, the soldier said. It didn't pay to get mad, or scream, or cry, or blame anybody for your troubles. That just wouldn't get you by.

Then the picture on the screen was a real tight close-up of the soldier as he started to tell his own story. He said that whenever something was taken away from him -- like the freedom to eat when he wanted, and the freedom to sleep when he wanted, or the freedom to go to the bathroom when and where he wanted -- he said he realized something funny: the only thing that he had left was the freedom to decide how he was going to feel about it.

Deciding how to feel -- that was a real big deal, like the open end of a long hallway for him. Whenever they put a dead-end wall in front of him, he said, he just decided to feel differently and it was like taking a sharp left turn away from the dead end.

"It worked for me." The soldier stared at us from the projection screen, gritty-toothed, big-jawed, scruffy-looking. He couldn't

lie. You could hear it in his voice; he really believed in this business about deciding to feel differently.

I slipped out the back door, telling Father Schwartze I had to check on my sister. Trudy was there behind the curtain sleeping lightly on the cot. I sat with her for a while, listening to her even breathing. For a minute, she woke and I told her to lick her lips because they were dry and had little bits of gook in the corners.

Her eyes crossed, then they uncrossed; she looked at me, her focus going in and out, in and out. She pointed weakly to her bloody parka, abandoned in the corner against the brick wall.

I didn't have to look. I knew somewhere deep inside all the zippers, snaps and secret compartments of Trudy's parka were the five trolls, sleeping peacefully, dreaming of freedom, their hair weaving like a rainbow in their sleep.

I shook my head, thinking about Trudy crawling around half-drugged in Sister Paula's office, looking for the trolls. To me it was a sad sight, but on Trudy's face a little grin of victory broke.

Back in the cafeteria, I found my seat just in time to catch the closing credits flashing on the screen. The record was finishing up, cracking and popping to the end, playing some heavy, slow-moving music that sounded like soldiers marching in a tired row.

In the dim light I could see Janie Hilzendger sitting in front of me, her silky ponytail brushing her slim shoulders. I looked for a long time at that bare neck, imagining what it might feel like to sink my teeth, just once, into that raw, unprotected flesh.

I considered it for a long time, before I thought about deciding to feel differently.

I thought about how I had just learned to skate backwards on my own that very afternoon, and how soon I would be able to do it for as long as I liked, my skates making smooth figure eights on the ice like a pencil flowing across paper, gathering speed, dropping words and letters like chips of ice flying from the blade of my skate.

The milky whiteness of Janie Hilzendger's neck glowed in the dark before me, unsuspecting, vulnerable, a kind of invitation.

Maybe Sister Mary Albertina could fly when she was wearing all her nun stuff. But I decided to set to work the very next day on getting wings -- real wings, with real feathers and everything.

GRANDFATHER'S HANDS

Grandfather's hands in the sausage tub,
where I sat for hours and watched him add

salt, pepper, garlic, salt, pepper,
garlic, then knead everything together

with his hairy knuckles. His hairy knuckles
reminding me of Brezhnev's eyebrows

on the steering wheel, driving me
to school in the fin-tailed Chevy

at five miles per hour.
Left turns taking an eternity

of stutter steps, inch-by-inch,
not hand-over-hand like my brother

was learning in Driver's Ed.
Grandfather's hands on the wheel

Memorial Day drives to Tappen
to put flowers on the boys' graves.

The three small wreathes
riding with me in the back seat

like well-behaved children.
The silence in the car afterwards,

except for the sound of the blinker
from the last left turn,

clicking on and off
all the way home.

T H E M O O N

The summer Sandy Schwartzenberger's older sister, Lucy, got pregnant and had to move away was the summer we landed on the moon.

The night we landed on the moon, Sandy and I were walking down the sidewalk to my grandmother's house. Sandy was trying to explain to me how it was that Lucy had gotten pregnant. I was very concerned about Lucy having to move away, mostly because everything that I knew about sex I had learned from her through Sandy.

"The guy has a thing," Sandy says, "and it gets big and he sticks it in you and it shoots this stuff in there that smells like Hi-lex."

"No way," I said and slugged her on the arm.

"Yes way," she says and slugs me back. I was busy trying to figure out the logistics of this, especially which part of my body was going to be involved.

But we were not operating completely in the dark. Earlier that year, the nuns had given us the monthly-blessing-that-visits-all-women speech. They had herded all the fifth grade girls into a classroom during recess one day. They had drawn the curtains and pulled the door shades. They had covered up the skylights.

We all sat quietly in the dark waiting to find out what it was we had done wrong.

Finally Sister Jacinta burst through the door with a movie projector on a cart. Beside the movie projector was a stack of mint green pamphlets. The movie projector, the cart and the pamphlets were all the same light shade of mint green.

The nuns handed out the pamphlets. They were smooth and new looking. On the green covers were splashes of white asterisks that looked like jacks from the game, ball and jacks.

I thumbed through the pamphlet by the light of the movie projector. It had illustrations of a girl my age going through several phases of realization. On every other page there was a light bulb turning on over her head. On the last page, she smiled at me reassuringly.

As the film droned on, I heard the boys coming back from recess. This made me so nervous I couldn't concentrate on the movie. In the hallway they were laughing and slamming their lockers. Through the slats at the bottom of the door, I could see their pantlegs as they leaned against the door, trying to peek through a crack in the curtain.

I knew I would die if they caught me watching this movie. I knew I would die if they found out what we were just being told. I knew that when we got out of the room, Stevie Silvernagel would try to pinch my boobs until I told him everything that we had been shown. I slipped the pamphlet in my bookbag and decided to read it when I got home.

All the way home that day on the bus, I thought about that cool, green brochure in my bookbag and how I was going to bring it out into the light of day and read it when I got to my bedroom.

When I got home, my mother was sewing in the utility room. The fabric she was working on was draped over her lap and onto the floor like a shroud. I waited beside the ironing board while my sisters and my brother went past. My mother looked up at me with pins sticking out of her mouth.

"That's nice material," I said. "What are you making."
"Curtains," she said through the pins, "for your brother's room." I opened the clasp of my bookbag and produced the pamphlet. I set it on the ironing board and leaned over the edge of the sewing table. "We learned about this in school today." I whispered. "The Sisters showed us a movie."

My mother picked up the book. She got a funny look on her face, the kind my brother would get if I caught him in the middle of a lie -- a little embarrassed, a little guilty, a little bit surprised. She glanced at the book with the white asterisks that looked like jacks for what seemed like a long time and then she said, "You won't need to know about this for a while."

She slid the book into the folds of fabric beside her sewing machine. She always kept her extra fabric on the table right beside her machine. She might keep a piece of material there for years until she found just the right pattern for it. When she found the right pattern she worked like mad, staying up half the night, fitting the pattern to the material, cutting it into pieces and then sewing it back together into some useful, new shape, like a pair of pants for my brother or a dress for me.

There were stacks and stacks of material there beside her sewing machine. I went back later to look for the book, but I couldn't find it. I never saw that book again.

After that, the only one who told me anything was Sandy Schwartzenberger. She would straighten the barrette in her hair during study hall, cup her hand to the side of her mouth and proceed to tell me that Tussy was the only deodorant to use, not Right Guard, and if you wore perfume, it should be Musk and you should put it in certain places on your body: the insides of your thighs, in between your boobs, on your throat and, of course, on the insides of your wrists.

Lucy had told her these were the places a boy was sure to go.

Sandy told me that Lucy had been flat-chested just like us a few years before but now she had huge boobs. She had seen them while Lucy was taking a bath one night, so she knew this for sure. She said our boobs would be that way someday too. I didn't believe her, though, because I had never seen my sister's boobs. I assumed that boobs were something that only ran in the Schwartzenberger family.

The night we landed on the moon and Sandy and I were walking down the sidewalk to my grandma's house, and she was telling me about how Lucy was pregnant, there was a carnival in town.

My grandma lived on the street in town that had a U-turn. Sometimes I would sit on her porch and watch people drive by, and then a few minutes later, watch them drive by again. I would wave to them both times. Across from her house was the city park and on Sundays, we would have dinner and then go over to swing and slide.

But that night, the whole street was barricaded off, from uptown all the way to the U-turn because of the carnival. The ferris wheel was set up right outside Grandma's front steps and Sandy and I sat on the porch watching people climb on and off the ferris wheel. They screamed and rocked as their creaky seats went around and around. When they got stuck on top, all we saw was the bottoms of their shoes.

We sat on Grandma's porch and laughed at Noogy Krall -- a boy in our class who had flunked so many grades that he no longer fit into the desks at school -- as he came off the ferris wheel, ran down the ramp, and threw up on some people who were waiting in line for their tickets.

It is the middle of July. A hot and humid night and Grandma has all her windows open. Inside we can hear the TV. Grandpa is the kind who can watch TV for hours without moving. He sits up straight on the couch, his hands folded over his stomach and watches. No talk of cards or attempts at conversation will distract him.

"For heaven's sake," I hear my grandma say. "Girls, come and look at this." Sandy and I go into the living room and there on the black and white screen is the pock-marked surface of the moon. There is an astronaut in a puffy white suit with hoses attached. He's bouncing as he walks. He carries an American flag which he finally pokes into the ground. "Isn't that something?" my grandma says. Grandpa watches the screen. He does not blink.

I love staying at Grandma's house because she always makes Tang for me in the mornings. When I get up, she stirs me up a glass. She and

Grandpa eat breakfast early because, although they have moved in from the farm years before, they still get up at five o'clock. But they let me sleep as late as I want, and then when I get up she makes me an egg and Tang. As I eat, she sits across the table from me and we listen to a religious talk show on the radio. There are callers with questions to which the minister responds. Sometimes they have interviews and read letters from fans.

Eventually there are hymns. This is my grandma's favorite part; she hums along. She is a very religious woman, I think, for a Lutheran.

I'd live with her forever if my parents would let me. When I stay here, I have my own room and at night I lie down on the clean, hard surface of her guest room bed and listen to the grandfather clock in the living room. I fall asleep making up songs and stories to go along with the ticking of the clock.

That night, the night we landed on the moon, after we watched it on TV, my grandpa surprised everyone by getting up from the couch, even though the TV was still on, and going out to the porch. He looked up in the sky for the moon, but it was low on the horizon and the ferris wheel was covering it. He stood out there for about half an hour, just staring at the moon, where it would have been, if the ferris wheel hadn't been covering it.

Sandy and I went to the midway and bought every ticket we could afford. We got every inch of our insides shaken and shimmied and

slammed by the ferris wheel and the tilt-o-whirl, and the cars that wreck each other. Then Sandy had to go home.

I went back to Grandma's. She was sitting on the porch when I got there. We sat together and watched people walk up and down the midway looking for members of their family who were lost. Have you seen so-and-so? Well if you do let him know we're going. Kids were crying because they didn't want to go home and parents were saying things like: If you keep acting like this, I'm never going to bring you with again.

Inside, Grandpa was watching the news.

Grandma pointed to the moon with a heavy arm and said, "Tell your grandpa that now he can see the moon if he wants."

"Grandpa," I called through the window. "The moon is up." He didn't answer.

"Imagine that." She said. "Those men. All the way up there on the moon. Think of their poor wives." We sat there for a long time, staring at the moon.

"Grandma," I finally said. "When you were young, did something really bad happen to you?"

"Sure," she said. "Lots of bad things happened. I lost my mom. I had to raise all my brothers and sisters."

"No, I mean something different."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Like bleeding." I said, looking her square in the face.

"Did that happen to you?" she asked.

"No." I said. "But I heard about it."

She turned to face me. "Sure, I remember when it happened to me," she said. "I never liked my stepmom. When I started to bleed, I thought I was dying. I didn't want her to know. I got old rags and stuffed them down there, then I burned them at night so that no one would know."

"Were you dying?" I asked.

"No. It went away in a few days. I was so happy. I thought, oh, I got lucky and everything healed. But it came back again later."

We sat and looked out at the street for a long time. The music had quieted down and the carnies had begun tearing apart the rides. They were moving slowly in the street light. I tried to find a way to describe to her this heaviness I was feeling in every cell, like some new kind of gravity.

Finally, she got up from her chair and stood behind me. She stood there for a while, running her fingers through the length of my hair. "I figured it out, little one," she said. "You will too." Then she went inside.

So this night, the night we land on the moon, I sit on my grandma's porch and watch the carnies move slowly in the dim light with their wrenches and hammers. The organ music has been replaced now by the clanking of machinery being dismantled. There is swearing and occasionally, far off, you can hear a woman laugh. All the rides I had just been on, now lay in heaps up and down the length of the street.

The boy who ran the ferris wheel bends over in front of me to pick up a large bundle of steel. He has taken off his shirt and his dark skin is shiny with sweat. His back is broad and it fans out on top, like a picture I've seen of a cobra getting ready to strike.

Two other carnies are giving him a hard time, calling him a pussy. They are tired, they say, of the way he is always sloughing off. They point to me and say that I could probably lift more than he can. They ask me if I want to join the carnival. He looks up at me and smiles. I watch him, the way his dark hair drapes down the back of his neck as he carries the bundle of steel to a trailer at the far end of the street.

As he turns and walks toward me, in the streetlight, the angles of his face and his chest remind me of the moon, the way it looked on TV -- with its flat surfaces of light and its deep, shadowed crevices. As he bends over to pick up another bundle, I notice he is wearing boots and I like the way that I cannot see his ankles when his pantlegs pull up.

I decide that I will never love a man who exposes his ankles in public. All I want to see is the wideness of his palms, the thinness of his waist, and the narrowness of his hips.

DOING THE TWIST

Felix has four daughters
just like the Lennon sisters
on the Lawrence Welk television
show. Felix has four daughters,
two altos and two sopranos,
but wouldn't you know, Felix
can't get those girls
to stand together in a straight row,
much less wear the same clothes.
Felix says, I've got four daughters
for all the good it's doing me.
One night, watching the tv, Felix
calls into the kitchen, says,
look here girls, come and see
this crazy dance. Come and see
this crazy Chubby Checkers.
The girls crowd the doorway,
watching Chubby grind out
cigarettes on the Ed Sullivan
show. One by one, they drop
their shoes. One by one,
they drop their dishtowels,
and in their stocking feet,
they try it, careful at first
on the hardwood floor, doing
the twist. What is going on?
Gladys calls from the kitchen, doing
the dishes by herself.
They're busy, Felix yells,
they're doing the twist.
After this, they do it

DOING THE TWIST -2

for holidays and company
and-whenver relatives come
from California. Felix goes
to Bismarck and buys the record
and damn if
those girls can't dance,
twisting in a diamond,
like all the points
on a compass. The sopranos
twisting high, the altos twisting
low, and the youngest one,
they say,
is a regular dervish.

T A L K I N G A N D E R D O W N

Even as their tour bus grinds slowly to a halt on the freeway, Bad Reputation realizes that they do not look nearly as Bad as they would like.

They are aware that their dinged-up school bus -- black and red with devil's horns on the side, a skull and cross-bones on the hood and their name, Bad Reputation, spray-painted in wild black letters on the side -- looks better in motion.

Inside the bus collectively lurching to the last gasps of the bus, Bad Reputation sits in a slovenly circle on old couches they have stolen from someone's grandmother's basement. Ripped jeans. Three day stubble. Earrings. Red eyes.

They look Bad, but only from a fashionable distance. Up close they look strung out, stranded, on their last dime.

"Did you try the choke," someone says. Someone must always say this. The choke is touchy, as are the tires and the transmission. It's a touchy bus; a bus that on principle requires coaxing.

"Yes, goddammit!" The driver says. His name is Hodgie. He pounds the wide steering wheel. "Damn." He tries the ignition again, the whirr winding lower and lower each time. "Damn, damn, damn," he says. As the driver, he must do this.

Bad Reputation collectively looks around the bus taking turns saying things like "bummer" and "drag." The general feeling: if it can't be fixed by playing a pentatonic scale on a guitar, they are helpless. "Major fry," Bad Reputation intones. "Royally screwed."

She is up there, the blaze, the one who can help them. Red-headed. Tangled in a cocoon of blankets and sleep.

"Blaze," Hodgie yells to the top bunk. Looking in the rear view mirror, he can see her up there, rousing, pulling on her boots, shaking the sleep out of her hair.

"Blaze," Bad Reputation calls. "It's time to go snag some juice."

Although singing is her job proper, soliciting roadway assistance is another of her talents. Snaggin', they call it.

Whenever they find themselves out of gas in the darkest part of the night in some small town in the middle of nowhere, her voice is the ticket to get the local cop to come and open the gas station.

"I'm just passing through and I seem to have run low on gas," she drawls into the pay phone. As soon as she hangs up the receiver, she crawls back to her bunk, her work done. When the cop follows the vapor trail through the telephone line to her voice, he finds a beaten down red-and-black bus and a band of scraggly musicians wanting to buy gas and eats, wanting change for the pop machine.

Hodgie hands her the jumper cables as she rolls out of the bus, throwing back her hair, working up that stranded-motorist-look.

For some reason, she's a magnet for men who own wrenches. There's something about the sight of her with those rusty cables in her hand standing by the side of the road that makes them go for their brakes, and by the time they see the rest of Bad Reputation -- those flat mugs that look like they belong on post office walls -- it's too late. They've already been hooked up to the ground post on the Bad-Rep-Mobile, donating a little juice for a very good cause.

"Thanks a lot, man." She waves and climbs back into the bus, The engine groans, then catches, the cables coming off, hoods slamming shut as, coughing and wheezing, Bad Reputation pulls off the shoulder and onto the highway, slowly picking up speed.

The bus is long and old and blows a wide trail of smoke as it screams down the highway. "BOUND 4 GIGZ" it says in dust on the emergency door in the back.

Mobile again, Bad Reputation, feels better. Rocking to the rattle and hum and the constant lurch of worn shocks, they turn their attention to more pressing matters. They collectively focus on Ander who has been hiding for most of the trip in the highest bunk overhead, the bunk that usually serves as a luggage rack. He's been up there, pretending to read a magazine, pretending not to hear what they are all thinking, what no one is yet saying.

"Really, I'm a soundman, not a drummer," Ander has been repeating this very quietly to himself over and over in that high bunk.

Bad Reputation is thinking en masse about Ander's brief stint as a drummer with his high school jazz band, about how he actually owns a set of drummer, about how he could, if pressed, fake a back beat.

Bad Reputation is thinking all of these things because of the obvious absence of their ace drummer Timmy Loud, whom earlier that afternoon they had fired quite suddenly when they stopped to pick him up and he informed them through his locked apartment door that he was sick.

"We'll have to cancel," Timmy Loud's words were muffled but discernible. "I've been puking all day."

Bad Reputation is certain they heard pop tops fizzing open in the background, bags of potato chips crackling.

They work for an agency that doesn't believe in sickness or malady of any kind. "The only reason for missing a gig is death -- and only your own," their agent, Jon LaChance likes to remind them sometimes.

But Timmy Loud has never heard this speech, because Timmy Loud never speaks to booking agents. He only speaks to his girlfriend Connie with whom, Bad Reputation suspects, he is currently in bed. The conventional wisdom: look deep enough into those spontaneous musician disappearances and you'll always find a woman behind it.

But drummers are hard to come by, so they don't give up so easily on Timmy Loud.

In Timmy Loud's apartment building that afternoon, Hodgie -- serving in his official capacity as Bad Reputation's lightman and, therefore, wielder of electricity -- finds the power breaker for Timmy Loud's apartment in the laundry room.

Current, after all, is his racket. He breaks into the circuit and cuts Timmy Loud's power. Connie is behind the flimsy apartment door, giggling.

"C'mon Honey," Ander calls through the door.

Ander has a nickname for everyone and everything: people are peeps, fans are bangers, rude fans are Z-bangers, people who smoke a lot are ciggie-kings.

Connie's nickname is Honey. But it's not just Honey. It's Honey, in a high, crusty, ninety-year-old woman's voice.

"Honey, c'mon honey." Bad Reputation calls through the door in the same high voice. "Let Timmy come out and play."

After a while, after Honey does not appear and Timmy does not appear, they trudge down the hallway, out of the building, banging in Timmy Loud's mailbox as they go, into the bus, on the way to the gig without Timmy Loud.

This is why, as the Bad-Rep-mobile cruises south, Ander gets more and more nervous. He knows they've got Timmy Loud's blue, twenty-four piece Tama drum set loaded in the back. He knows they've got Timmy Loud's tuned cow bells and his Paiste cymbals. He knows they've got Timmy Loud's equipment by the balls but that they have no

other part of him and that they're racing madly toward a gig, a group of musicians not one of whom knows how to play drums.

Ander knows they've got his ass in a sling.

On their way to the gig, Bad Reputation votes unanimously to hire Ander to be their drummer. According to Bad Rep rules, as a roadie, Ander has no vote. When he's promoted to drummer, he gets a vote but by then it's too late -- the ballots have already been cast.

They promote Hodgie, their lightman, to Ander's job as soundman and they appoint Duke, their spotman, to run lights. They ask Rita, Duke's girlfriend, who is just along for the ride, to run their spotlight.

They do all of this within a matter of about sixty miles, also nicknaming Rita, "Pleats," because she's wearing baggy, pleated pants and they know Ander has enough to worry about right now without having to think about nicknames.

That night is a mild, functional disaster -- miscues, play-throughs, muffed fills. As they pull away from the club, laughing about the forty-five minute, extended-play version of "Cocaine" they had to do to get through the night, Bad Reputation officially declares the gig a caper. They commend Ander for his bravura and balls and give him an extra cut of pay, reinstating everyone to their original positions, promising Ander they will put an ad in the paper the next day for a real drummer.

The ad reads: "Seriously Bad Rock Band looking for Seriously Bad Drummer." They spend a lot of time working on the wording of this ad hoping that it will cause only the serious to apply. But as drummers stream through the practice room, sliding behind Timmy Loud's blue, 24-piece Tama drum set, slicing the beat up according to their very different ears, Bad Reputation begins to think in more affectionate terms about The Loud.

Memory being what memory is, they forget the aggravating way Timmy Loud had of playing what they all agreed was "lead drums" over the top of everybody. They start wondering if maybe the little guy wasn't really kinda sick that day.

When the polka band drummer named Merle starts to play, Bad Reputation sees plaid. They know, from the way he plays, that Merle has a drum set at home that's covered with the turquoise ticky-tacky from his mother's cupboards.

The next guy is Bernie. He's a walking slouch whose wife encouraged him to "go for it." He hasn't played since high school, and Bad Reputation can tell from his playing that high school's been some time ago. At home, no doubt, the Bern-man (as Ander later calls him) has a Ringo Starr special: a bass, snare and wobbly high-hat.

Albert, when he comes in, announces he would have to consult his minister before taking the job.

Blather (that's his stage name) is acne-in-motion. He's all foot and no hands. Everything is metal-slow, thick and heavy: "Blather-like" the band later invents the word to describe it. Sometimes they

find they just have to invent words for the things they hear.

Timmy Loud is out-of-town. Mexico, someone says.

Ander is their drummer.

The Level Seven. Thursday night. Blaze descends to the dressing room navigating the shaky steps in her stilettos. The incline is steep. There is no handrail, yet she flies down them easily, long-limbed and capable, never once thinking of falling.

She is thinking instead about the seventh level of the Level Seven. Where is it? The club is a series of balconies (one high and stage right, one medium-high and stage left) and raised platforms (three at different heights rising up behind the long narrow bar) and long winding steps to connect all the levels.

"An insurance man's nightmare," their agent Jon LaChance warned them the first time he sent them to the club. Ander has been their drummer for six weeks.

The sixth level is deep and to the right of the stage -- the snakepit, as the guys in the band call it, because the drunkest drunks (the ones who roar for "tits!") and the most venomous hecklers (the ones who yell "take a break" between songs) usually land there by the end of the night.

When setting up, the band points a PA column straight into the pit. On evenings when things get ugly, they crank the power and pour

pure unadulterated noise into the pit. Nothing like sheer volume, they figure, to drive out the riff-raff.

Blaze makes her way through the basement of the Level Seven, through the discarded cardboard boxes, the empty kegs, past the slouching bartender on break who quietly smokes a cigarette, past the deep freezes and the dust, through the stale smell of smoke and beer into the dressing room -- a small windowless room, filled with old burnt out couches and four solid walls of graffiti: stenciled peace signs left over from the sixties; band boasts (Titanica Rules!); diatribes against booking agents (Brian Young is a Nazi!); and a fair amount of out-and-out whining (Pamela, call the doctor. I'm not feeling so well).

A wailing wall of rock and roll.

"You gotta think groooooove," Vinny 1 is lecturing Ander. Ander sits on the couch, nodding, clicking his drumsticks on the pockmarked table top. Vinny 1 is half of the band's guitar duo -- Vinny 1 and Vinny 2 -- brothers, both dark, swarthy, Italian guitarist with hip length hair and natural curls that most women would slap down 125 bucks in a good salon to try for.

"Forget this tic, tic, tic." Vinny sucks slowly on a burnt out roach.

Ander nods as if comprehending, ticking away, holding his drum sticks with a loose jazz grip, like a civilized man holding silverware. At heart, Ander tells himself, I am still a soundman, really, not a drummer.

"Think noize." Vinny 1 buzzes the z. He blows a light "boom" from his lips like the sound of a bomb dropping, then lifts his hands to the form of a mushroom cloud rising.

Ander shakes his head. At base, he knows he is no anarchist. In fact, he is a meticulous person, someone who thrives on order. As a soundman, it pleased him the way the knobs on his soundboard sat in neat, polished rows. He was comforted by the fact that at any time he knew the exact location of his roll of duct tape, because in any band whoever knows the location of the roll duct tape is in a position of power.

Order. Ander revels in it. When he was a soundman, he could stand behind his soundboard, no sweat, in control, every strand of his blonde, shag haircut layering as nicely on his head as his barber had intended.

But as a drummer, he has fears that breaking the order of any of his carefully constructed rituals will anger the gods of rhythm, causing him to miss fills and play through breaks.

He never touches a drop of alcohol while playing, and he's confided to several band members that a bowel movement between sets throws his rhythm off so severely for the rest of the evening that he has just avoids them altogether around gig-time.

"Forget control," Vinny 1 says to Ander. "Think, Loud." In his own way, Vinny 1 is trying to teach Ander the fine art of noise-making. "It's the only way into the groove," Vinny says.

"I'm no Loud," Ander confesses. Thank god. Timmy Loud played "lead drums" -- long drum fills rolling wildly across his twelve-piece roto-toms. Rambling over the beat, coming out long, coming out short, forcing the rest of the band to adjust when he came back to his snare, the whole band hanging suspended for that one long moment while Timmy Loud worked at coming back to the One. Even for Vinny 1 and 2, that was too much static in the system.

A virtual study in noise, Timmy Loud held his drumsticks like a starving man holds off hock of ham. And this was one of his more endearing quality.

"Nobody expects you to be the Loud," says Vinny 1.

"God, no," Blaze says. She's in the corner changing clothes behind a sheet she has hung up to make a dressing room.

"Just forget that damn tic tic," Vinny says, "because it's driving me nuts."

"Hey you guys." Blaze comes out from behind the curtain wearing something that looks like a second layer of red skin. "Where do you suppose the seventh level is?"

She scans the dressing room walls for news from any bands she might know, but the best thing she finds is a sketch about their booking agency, The Great Music Agency, otherwise known as GMA, but more often referred to as The Great Mileage Agency due to the slingshot method they employ when routing their band's tours.

The sketch on the wall is a map of the continental United States (actually pretty well drawn) with the rings of a dartboard superimposed over it. In the sketch, a few feet away from the dartboard is a blindfolded booking agent with a thick moustache (Jon LaChance?) throwing wild missiles at the board -- now Topeka, now Denver, now Omaha, now Cincinnati.

Underneath the caption reads: "GMA Booking Practices."

"The seventh level?" Ander looks up, still ticking, mentally counting out the tiers and balconies of the Level Seven.

"Maybe the stage," Vinny 1 offers.

"A possibility." Blaze considers. Many nights she has hung over the edge of that high round stage that rose up like a tall, thin can of beer, never once considering the possibility that it might be the seventh level.

"Maybe it's the dance floor," Ander says.

The Level Seven is a disco gone bad. When it failed, the owner turned it back to rock and roll, but the dance floor still bears traces of those dark, sequin-and-polyester years -- a sunken dance floor with strobing and flashing lights. Ander's preoccupation, even while a soundman, was watching dancers.

"Maybe there is no seventh level," Vinny says, running a cloth over the top of his strings, polishing his guitar, getting ready for the night. "Maybe it's just somebody's idea of fuckin' with a lot of people's heads."

* * * * *

It's a regular weeknight, slow. Small clusters of people around tables. Lots of bangers out there. Z-bangers, too, sitting on their hands.

In fact they seem to be enjoying Bad Reputation's taped break music more than the live sets. During breaks, the bangers crowd the dance floor and gyrate to the break music. After every taped song, they applaud wildly.

When the band starts playing, the Peeps (Ander's word for chicken-shits) migrate to tables at the back of the bar. As soon as they hear that first guitar chord ring out, they pick up their beers and table napkins and just move. They want to have nice intimate conversations, and, on principle, Bad Reputation plays too loud to let them.

On break Ander is out there drinking Coke with ice in a tall, frosty glass. He's mingling, leaving his glass setting on the counter as he turns around to talk to people in the aisles.

He gets on stage for the third set, goes through his ritual. He wipes his forehead on a clean, white hand towel which he keeps on a little hook on his floor tom. After this, he wipes his hands on the towel and hangs it back on the hook. He then wipes his hands on his thighs, one more time for luck. Lastly, he flicks his hair back in a quick motion with both hands, then picks up his drum sticks, one at a time, left one first, then right.

"Ready," Vinny 2 asks Ander, trying to hurry him along.

Although it's dark on stage, every person in the band knows Ander's doing these things because they have watched him go through these motions before every song of every set of every performance since the day they fired Timmy Loud.

"Something's not right," Ander says. "These sticks feel too thick." He gets out a flashlight that he keeps on a magnet nearby. He checks the size of the sticks and finds they are right. As the lights come up, Blaze notices he has a cautious look on his face, like a dog who's heard something no one else has heard.

He clicks the sticks four times and they lumber off. They follow Ander's beat like it's a road rushing out before them, because the beat is the only way Bad Reputation knows to get where they want to go.

They follow him up the hills, around curves, and through the mountains, until about five minutes later, they find themselves back where they started.

The echo of the last chord falls like a heavy curtain. The lights go down. There's a smattering of applause, more talking.

Blaze looks back at Ander. He is concentrating very hard now on his fingernails. He has his flashlight out again. He is biting and inspecting, biting and inspecting.

He stands up, reaching into his pocket for a nail clipper. He sits down again and begins to clip away at his nails.

Blaze climbs through the first layer of cords, slips through a space between two amps. "Ander," she hisses, "the song. Get to the song." He is busy now working on his cuticles.

"All right. All right." He waves his hand at her, picking up his sticks. He stares again at his sticks, funny.

"Thick?" she asks.

"Yeah. Strangest thing."

He checks the size again with the flashlight, takes his time with his white hand towel, then they are off.

The rest of the band is looking at Blaze for clues as to what's going on. All around, she is getting knitted brows and cocked heads. All she can do is shrug.

After the song is over, Ander swerves around on his seat and stares up at the neon "Level Seven" sign hanging as a backdrop behind the band.

Again, Blaze climbs through equipment to get to him where he is cushioned between the wall and his drum set. It's cozy back there, she is thinking, like being buckled into a tight sports car. Something for every appendage to do.

"You can see the gas move through the tubes," Ander tells Blaze when she finally gets next to him. "But you have to look really close."

Together they turn and watch the neon pump through the tubes for a while.

"Hey. Hey, hey!" Vinny 1 and 2 finally yell. "Problem?"

Ander and Blaze stare at each other, then stare back through the layers of cymbals and tom toms at the rest of the band. All those guitar players, hands on the necks of their guitars, ready for take-off.

"I can't," he barely whispers. "Something's wrong." His sticks are still in his hands. Blaze notices the towel is still on its little hook, untouched. Something is definitely wrong.

She asks Hodgie to bring up the drum lights. Tilting Ander's head back, she looks into his eyes. They are wide and dark looking. His pupils dominate. There is no trace of Ander's ragged blue eyes, only the black island of pupil, swimming in the ocean of white.

"You tripping?" She asks. His feet start moving and his knees start pumping like pistons. "Ander," she says, in her deepest tone. "Someone was probably trying to do you a favor."

"Oh shit," is all he can say. "Oh shit."

"I'm going to be right here with you," Blaze points to the monitor, the little black speaker box that feeds her voice back to him all night.

"See? Now, watch me," Blaze says, pointing at herself so that there will be no confusion as to who she is.

"Follow me," she says. She has no idea what good this will do, but it sounds like a nice, general command. He nods, a look of profound comprehension on his face.

"Let's do 'Dazed and Confused'," she says. "That's a good one. Straight ahead."

"One, Two, Three, Four," Ander yells in a hoarse voice, and they are off. They move through every fill, every break. With caution, they find the verse, the chorus, the bridge, the solo and when the tricky turn-around comes they wobble through it as if they were held together by duct tape. Careful, Careful, turn it around, coming home, coming home, they are on our way home.

It goes on like this for the rest of the evening, only worse. During the last break, Ander claims his sticks are stuck to his hands. He cannot lose them. They spend ten minutes convincing him to let them take the sticks out of his hands. Then, after he wipes his hands, they spend the rest of the break tugging on his little, white hand towel.

During the last set to occupy him, Blaze dances. For one song, she's a belly dancer. For the next, she does the tango. For a while, she directs him like a traffic cop, and when the breaks come at the ends of the songs, she slashes her neck with her finger and raises her hand to tell him to stop.

For the funky parts, she fakes disco moves. And when she gets really bored, she steals a cymbal from Ander's drum set and wears it on her head like a hat, pretending to be Chinese. By the end of the

night, she has run out of ideas. Then she just dances in slow, counter-clockwise circles, unwinding time. She dances around the campfire only Ander can see.

Ander is rapt. He sees only the traces of things. For the two sticks they see hitting his drums, he sees hundreds. He has no idea where the beat is, but he finds it. At one point, he stops the entire band to tell them the lights are magnificent, the way they move and sweep.

He compliments their lightman through a cymbal microphone. He says, "Good job, Hodgie." For a while, he won't play because his drum heads are filled with milk and he doesn't want to spill them.

"Milk smells pretty bad," he tells them, "when you get it in the carpet."

After the gig as Bad Reputation is tearing down, Blaze goes upstairs to the office to get paid. The club owner is a real oddball. He drives a big, old Caddy that he leaves running outside the back door of the club all night no matter what the weather, so that he will never have trouble starting it. In fact at this moment as she occupies him, Bad Reputation is out back getting a little free juice off of that Caddy.

She has heard rumors about this bar owner, about the hand guns he keeps in his desk and his expert control with hunting knives.

She walks past the rows of liquor -- Johnson's whiskey, Johnson's tequila, Johnson's gin, Johnson's rum. The bottles are upside down in the liquor pipeline, glubbing away like IV's, feeding liquor through the tubes, down to the bar, into glasses, into all those thirsty mouths.

The seventh level, she is thinking, walking tired on her high heels past the cases of empty bottles. This must be it.

The club owner tells her to come in, compliments her on the band. "I had my doubts about your new drummer in the beginning," he says. "I don't mind telling you, I was a real Timmy Loud fan." He counts the money, putting it in piles of hundreds.

"But this new sonofabitch is hot," he tells Blaze. "He's real hot."

She curls the money into a fat wad in her palm, climbing down the creaky stairs, past the silent bar, past the empty stools, across the still strobing dance floor, out the back door and into the parking lot.

Outside, the roadies are busy pushing, coaxing and swearing the last few pieces -- the pieces that never fit, no matter how carefully they pack -- into the back of the bus. The rest of the band stands outside the back door, waiting for that magical moment when the back bus door finally closes, signaling that they are officially packed,

so that everyone can go inside the bus. Because to go inside the bus one moment sooner would be to declare yourself lazy, a pussy-wimp.

Leaning against the brick wall is Ander, looking like the real deal, like he's waiting for a photograph to be taken of him with his foot tucked behind him on the wall, his collar turned up around his neck and a cigarette hanging off his lip. He is running his hand like a constant comb through his hair. Around him, Bad Reputation stands in a loose laughing circle.

"You were serious," Vinny 1 says. "Seriously bad."

"Jesus." Ander laughs, jangled and giddy. "I made a shitload of noise tonight."

"Want a job," Vinny 2 says, laughing.

"Why not," Ander says, his eyes wild.

Pushing free of the building, he heads for the bus. Bad Reputation follows him in a long, loose line, climbing one-by-one onto the black and red beast, idling and fuming in the dark night, dreaming of the long ride home.

THE WOMAN ON THE DANCE

these hips are mighty hips

these hips are magic hips

-- Lucille Clifton

The woman
the woman
the woman on the dance floor's hips
do not sway or dip or grind.
They only swish bump swish bump
swish through the songs
strung together like the beads
on the chain around
her neck.

The woman on the dance
floor's hips do not have
a country, did not vote
for president,
are scarcely connected
to the arms that rise
to straighten a hair,
to the eyes that turn
to study the drummer
under hot flashing
lights.

The woman
on the dance floor's hips
are neutrons
in an atom,
needing nothing to sustain them,
nothing to sustain
them, nothing.

SANTIAGO'S DEAD

The man has been watching the woman sleep for fifteen minutes now. When she wakes he will give her the bad news. He does not want to wake her but he knows she would want to know about it as soon as possible.

The woman is dreaming a body of water -- deep, endless, full of seaweed. No matter how hard she swims, her long strokes stretching far ahead of her, she continues to find herself in the center, never closer to the shore. Her body forgets its earliest lesson -- how to stay afloat. She sinks slowly, fatigued from the long swim across. She flails her arms to remain afloat, but as it always is in dreams she can never move them quickly enough.

The man waits, quietly regarding the delicacy of the woman in her sleep, the brown hair flowing in long, loose strands around her on the pillow, the innocence of those closed eyes. He is tempted to touch her, to trace with his finger the high curve of her cheekbone, her lips now swollen from sleep.

In the water of the dream, the woman's long hair spirals after her. She becomes all lungs, heavy and full. The greedy weeds love her feet. She brings her hands to her throat to keep the water out and that is what finally wakes her: her hands growing tight around her neck.

"Santiago's dead," the man says when she opens her eyes.

The woman is still underwater. She cannot hear what the man has said. In the dim bedroom she sees only his silhouette and a white haze surrounding his body. She tries to call out for help, but her throat does not work, and even if it did, he could not hear her.

"I played guitar for him for an hour," he says. "It seemed to help, but in the end he just stopped swimming." The man sits on the bed; his hands are lying useless in his lap. "He went to the surface and he just stopped swimming."

The woman pulls herself up in the bed. Through the window she can see the globe of the streetlight and the thin rings of light around it.

"Jesus." She clears her throat, the word sputtering like water out of her lungs. "What time is it?" She finally asks.

"Three." The man bends over resting his head on her chest, his long black hair streaming into her lap. "I knew that you would want to know about it right away."

It's true. The woman does want to know. Santiago was their champion -- the one that had lasted the longest. But she also knows it's only an excuse, like all the other excuses he has used over the years to wake her.

At first there were the small knocking noises in the middle of the night that he didn't understand and was worried about, or the times when the water heater ran out of hot water and he wondered if she could get him the landlord's phone number.

Then there were the late night TV specials about the mating rituals of animals which always made him lonely for her, and the missing tools which he desperately needed, and he was sorry to wake her but he had to know where she had put them -- because she was always putting things away in places where he could not find them.

Lately the woman wakes to the extermination of hordes of waterbugs, roaches and silverfish that only make their appearance after midnight, and to the grinding hum and whine of the vacuum passing phantom-like across the living room carpet, which in the darkest hour of the night has become inexcusably dirty.

Then there are the fish. Every two or three months, there are the dying-in-the-middle-of-the-night fish.

The man has a need for these excuses because in all the years they have lived together, the man has not slept -- that is to say, the man has never come upstairs to bed and slept -- and there are still those nights that are too long and too dark, even for him.

He came to her after their affair, after his wife found the letters they continued to write after their affair. He came to her, reluctantly, filled suddenly with stories -- stories of how happy he had been with his wife, not knowing it, of course, until it was too late. Stories of how his wife had decorated their first apartment entirely in blue because blue was his favorite color. Stories about how being married to her and living in that all-blue apartment had been like being in heaven.

This is how the woman came to find the fish. At the mall one day scanning the windows for something blue to buy, she saw the bettas floating in a store window, their blue fins streaming off their bodies like thin wisps of Chinese silk.

The woman went inside the pet store to observe the fish more closely. Those fins, the way they floated so gracefully in the water reminded her of the man's long hair, the way it spread around him in the pool. The woman had made this observation many times from poolside. Afraid of water, she herself would never actually go into it.

She took her time, selecting the two bluest fish, asking the attendant to put them in a bag for her, and to recommend a tank that would work for the two of them.

"No can do," the attendant said. He was enjoying his gum considerably.

"No can do?" the woman asked.

"Nope. You gotta have separate tanks for these babies. Otherwise, they'll pulverize each other." When the attendant said the word 'pulverize' a little bit of spit shot out of his mouth and landed on the counter.

"All's I know," the attendant leaned forward confidentially, "is they bet on 'em in Japan or Thailand or somewhere, you know, like in cock fights."

"So when you put them in a tank together?" the woman asked.

"They pulverize each other." He smiled. "Like this."

The attendant reached behind the counter, producing a large hand mirror. He pressed the mirror up against the tank where the largest betta swam alone in the clear water.

The blue fish faced himself in the mirror; his fins spread wide like an oriental fan; his gills rose in a tight blossom around his neck. He hung there very still in the water, guarding his reflection for any sign of a possible attack.

"That's why they call 'em Siamese fighting fish." The attendant whispered.

They watched as the fish held and improved his stance. He inhaled, pumping himself up, suspended in the water, a preening, lone warrior. He reminded the woman of a weightlifter in a body building competition, posturing in the final round, struggling to match and outdo his own next move.

"How long could this go on?" the woman asked.

"Oh, all day, all night." The attendant shrugged. He removed the hand mirror. The fish relaxed immediately and fainted to the far corner of the tank. "Just as long as they see that reflection, or another one of their own kind.

The woman stood in front of the tank, trying to make a decision.

"Are there females?" the woman asked.

"Sure," the attendant said, pointing to a tank on the end of the counter full of bland, unremarkable fish. "Plain as a stripped-down Chevy," he whispered to the woman. "Not much good, unless you plan on breeding."

"No," the woman said, returning to the tank where the large blue male swam, contemplating her final decision.

"Will he get along with other fish?" She turned to ask.

"All except for the bite-size ones," the attendant said, tired of the woman's questions, anxious to close the sale. "I could fix you up with a good mixture."

"No." The woman said, thinking. "No mixture. Just one. One betta and a tank to go with him." The woman was excited. She could not wait to get home to show the man the newest blue thing she had found.

The first fish had not been Santiago. The man and the woman, in a fit of originality, had named the first fish Blue.

Santiago had come much later, after Blue, after they had set up another tank and started keeping the bettas in pairs -- pairs such as Zelda and F. Scott who succeeded Zelda then Ahab who outlasted F. Scott and then Ishmael and then much, much later there was Papa who went through Hadley and Pauline and countless others until Santiago came along.

Nobody had outlasted Santiago.

The ringing telephone cuts through the woman's dream the morning after Santiago.

In the dream a toucan perches in a cage in the corner and when it opens its mouth to squack what comes out is the telephone's ring. The toucan continues to open its mouth and squack at intervals matching the telephone. The woman wonders about the timing of such dreams. These middle-of-the-night calls are frequent; over the years the woman has seen tugboats ring in her dreams, fire engines. Once a coconut opened up and began to ring.

The telephone, as usual, when she answers it, is dead on the other end. "Hello," the woman says, trying to sound chipper, well-slept, unperturbed. Nothing comes back but the steady shush of waves, the long distance hum of silent listening.

"Hello. Hotel Singapore," the woman says, trying to sound far away, exotic, like an expensive misdialled phone call.

In the beginning the police advised her to blow a whistle into the receiver. They gave her an industrial-strength steel whistle that would cut an eardrum to shreds. But the woman had grown tired of blowing it at all hours of the day and night. It had driven the neighbors crazy, and it never seemed to stop the calls.

"Can I help you?" The woman says finally into the receiver, trying to charm the caller into a state of speech. She has begun to admire the loyalty of this caller and in a strange way to depend on it.

"Without you," the woman whispers into her pillow hanging up the receiver, "I might need an alarm clock."

The man is singing in the bathroom this morning. His contra basso filters through the rush of running water. It's Puccini. The woman recognizes it from the needle-lifting drill he has been subjecting himself to this last month: now the acrobatic fingering of Mozart; now Bach's unrelenting, mathematical precision; now Debussy's scattered expressionism.

Living with the man, the woman has been forced to listen and learn as well, especially the Romantics. The man has a weakness for the Romantics, for all that schmaltz and ooze. The man is concerned about the future of the Romantics; it appears they are being drummed out of the canon. Every day in Musicology the man argues with his professor Dr. Pilcher who, along with most of his colleagues, prefers the clean, intellectual clarity of the Classical period.

A few weeks before (who can account for these moments of domestic insanity?) the woman had grown so tired of the man's needle-dropping exercises -- never getting to hear an entire piece, only the tiny snippets that will identify the composer -- she had to do something.

One night when the man was in the basement working, she sneaked downstairs to his record collection and searched quietly through the man's alphabetized records.

Removing Wagner's Ring Operas from the record sleeve, the woman had replaced it with her copy of Devo's Duty Now For the Future.

Finding that she got such immense pleasure from this, she searched further. She found Tchaikovsky's Pathetique and replaced it with Pink Floyd's Ummagumma.

The woman has been waiting patiently for some response from the man on this musical reversal, this little chink in his system of organization, but so far he has been oddly silent.

In the bathroom this morning however, the man will not be silent.

This morning, it's Puccini. Here comes the tragic recurring motif, the complaining whine of the soprano circling back, over and over, like a carrion bird, reminding the listener of the bad news.

The man reaches for the high, elusive notes, groping and failing, his voice finally slipping, missing the long climb.

"Amateur," the woman grumbles, throwing the covers off, getting out of bed.

The woman has a secret hatred for casual singers -- the lady behind her in the checkout counter humming along with the Muzak, her boss who whistles Christmas carols all year long except at Christmas time. The woman hates them all. She wants them to stop -- the hummers, the whistlers, the under-the-breath singers. She wishes they would keep all those badly-sung notes to themselves.

The man is in the bathroom, still singing and shaving. The vowels rise and fall, tighten and loosen according to the position of the razor on his neck. The woman gets out of bed, pulling the covers off in order to re-make it.

When she lifts the corner of the mattress and slips the sheet underneath, the smell rises to greet her again this morning. It's a distinctive odor, a mustiness the woman has been trying to find the origin of for several months now. She has narrowed it down to the waterbed.

Already she has torn down the bed from where it stood for seven years. Under it she expected to find a small, half-rotted carcass, but when she unhinged the last boards and ran her fingers through the nap, she found nothing, just the yellow carpet, bright and unmatted, looking considerably better than the carpet where it had been walked on all those years.

The woman has bleached the bedding and wiped the mattress down. She has changed the water and added conditioner, but when the bed was reassembled, the smell returned.

She has given up on finding the origin of the smell. She is, instead, these days, working on getting used to it. Some days it is better than others. Today, the woman decides, it's better.

"Morning," the woman quietly whispers down the steps to the man as she crosses the hall to the bathroom.

She has waited until he is downstairs, until she is certain he has cleared the bathroom, so there would be no chance that she will meet him in the hallway.

The woman knows by the sounds he is making downstairs that he is going through his early morning ritual. Although the woman cannot see him, she knows, according to the sounds he is making, exactly what he's doing. He's blow drying his hair, sitting in the lotus position in front of the TV. Posted on either side of him like sentinels are two window fans blowing on their highest setting.

Today is not a hot day, but today like every other day the man insists on running the fans. The man is uncomfortable in the humidity and has never forgiven the woman for luring him into the humid climate in which they now live.

Every morning before she leaves for work, he reminds her of this by giving her the current barometric pressure, stating it matter-of-factly, as if it were all her doing. And every morning, no matter what the season, he has the two noisy box fans blowing on high.

As the woman brushes her teeth, bending over the sink to rinse, she pictures the man downstairs. Propped at his feet will be a textbook from a class he has taken some previous year -- music theory, art history, physics -- it's a different book every morning, but one thing is always the same: every line of text has been highlighted, so the man will be sure not to have missed anything.

The man scans textbooks by way of a complex hi-lighting system he has developed over the years -- a triage, of sorts, of knowledge consumption. In the man's textbooks all proper nouns and dates are hi-lighted in yellow. (This alerts him immediately that something noteworthy and therefore memorable is approaching.) All significant events are marked in pink. Theories, laws and rules are marked in green, and the rest of the text is glossed over in blue, the woman theorizes, just to make the page look more pleasant to the man.

Paying special attention to the area of her incisors the woman works the toothbrush around her mouth, careful to do a thorough job. Through the foam of toothpaste, she chuckles remembering the day a few months back when she had stayed home from work sick. But she had not been so sick that day. She'd still had the strength that day to take down many of the man's favorite textbooks and trace over his hi-lighting system, making new colors -- oranges, mauves, purples.

For months she has been hoping for a reaction, some sign that she had upset the man's balance in some small way. But he has never mentioned it, and she has never asked.

Still sometimes she remembers it at odd moments: when she wakes up in the middle of the night, or like this morning brushing her teeth, and she cannot help but snicker about it. These are small things, the woman realizes, but immensely important to her.

After she has showered and dressed for work, she goes downstairs to meet the man. She finds him there, just as she imagined. He is, this morning, testing himself for memory retention on the late Romantic period while watching "Gilligan's Island" on TV.

She notices his eyes are tired and more red than usual. She slips onto the couch and waits for him to turn the fans down so they can speak.

The man continues to dry his hair, holding each long strand at an angle, running the blow dryer up and down the length of it. It's a tedious process, taking more time than the woman would ever spend on her own hair.

"Bad night?" The woman asks. On the end table beside the couch are the two fish tanks, empty now, the water growing cloudy from the parasites that are flourishing in the water. Parasites, the woman thinks, that have not yet been informed that the host is dead.

"I can't do this anymore." The man says, sitting down next to the woman.

"Do what?"

"That." The man points to the countertop where Santiago waits. "I can't go through that again. I love having them," he says, "but I can't stand losing them." The man lowers his head, rubbing his eyes.

"You don't have to," the woman says. "Let's give it three days. Three days for the tanks to clear, for the parasites to kill each other." The woman bends over and pecks the man on the top of the head. "Three days to think about it."

"He's over there." The man says softly, nodding toward the kitchen.

Since the man is always the one who finds the bodies in the middle of the night, he is the one who fishes them out of the water. He wraps them in paper towels and runs a roll of tape around the package, leaving it on the kitchen counter for the woman to take to work in the morning to bury in an empty lot behind her office. The man wants the fish to have a decent burial. He cannot bear the thought of flushing them down the toilet like ordinary fish.

"I've got to go." The woman picks up Santiago carefully, balancing the featherweight in her palm.

"Sixteen-point-nine today," the man calls after her as the door closes.

On her way to the car, the woman slips Santiago into the garbage dumpster behind the building. She is careful to slip him deep under a discarded box full of empty jars and soiled diapers so the man will have no chance of finding him.

The man and the woman had once been musicians in a band together. They were brought together by a cunning business manager named Chambers who, in discovering their individual talents, had hoped for a miracle of alchemical proportions in the combination of them.

At first the man and the woman had played their parts in Chambers' script reluctantly. The leading man and the love interest, they had joked, "how predictable."

But eventually they had become fooled by it. Like actors portraying two people in love, they had fallen into the part, forgetting about the life after the story, the life after everyone had gone home drunk with satisfaction, lulled to sleep by the sheer unity of the plot.

The woman did not like to think of these things, but now she made an effort to remember the events that had brought the man finally to her. It was her letters, she realized, that made the man's wife finally snap.

After the band had broken up, buckling under from the natural decay at work in any band, the man's wife, thinking she had seen the last of the woman and the last of her troubles with the man, allowed her husband to return home one last time.

One day, months later cleaning the house, the man's wife had found the shoebox, stuffed with letters, voluminous, written in the woman's sprawling handwriting, wild Qs and Xs slashing the margins.

The man's wife read the letters, then placed them carefully back in the box. She left the house that afternoon, going to the bank to draw out one hundred dollars, stopping at U-Haul to pick up a trailer large enough for all the man's possessions.

This is how the man came to appear, stunned and bewildered, at the woman's doorstep. Opening the door, the woman could not believe what she was seeing. She pulled him inside quickly, not believing her luck, thinking all their problems were behind them, and good things in front of them.

But there were problems; the man was not well. The man, in fact, would not be well for quite some time.

In the mornings when the woman left for work, he joked with her about the exposed rafters in the ceiling, wondering aloud how much weight they would support, and how difficult it might be to get a rope around the top of them. When the woman turned her key in the lock at the end of the day, she was always afraid of what she might find.

It was not that the man was not busy; the man had plenty to do. There was his practice schedule: six hours a day of classical guitar, six hours of electric. The instrument, by its very nature, was demanding, vain, unforgiving.

And there was homework for the classes the woman had encouraged him to take. There was the handful of guitar students who stumbled in each week with their poor excuses for not practicing and never improving, and then there was the manuscript, the rock guitar textbook that was to contain all the knowledge the man had so painfully acquired over his fifteen years on the road.

"I hope to explain," the man said, loftily, "everything that has happened to the electric guitar in the last fifty years, from Segovia to Chuck Berry, from Jimmy Page to Ritchie Blackmore, from Randy Rhodes to Yngwie Malmsteen." It was to be a monumental task -- the story, in fact, of the man's very life.

He worked on it all hours of the day and night, slaving away in the downstairs den, torturing himself over the accuracy of the transcriptions. Some nights the woman found the man in the basement so huddled and bleary-eyed that she took to calling the place "the dungeon."

She began to keep a mental log of the man's dungeon life. It was, in fact, the dungeon where the woman had found him the day he had gotten his divorce papers in the mail.

Coming home from work that day, she discovered him poring over a thick sheaf of documents. The man was stunned. He could not believe his wife would desert him.

"Well, honey," the woman said. "You left her. I mean, we've been together a long time."

"I didn't leave her." The man said. "She told me to leave. What was I supposed to do?"

"You said you wanted to be with me," the woman said, stunned.

"I did," the man said, "but I didn't think she would do this. I mean, we made some promises to each other."

As the man flicked through the pages, marked with roman numerals, containing clauses about the man having no further claims to the property and to the wife he had not seen for years, the woman remembered the conversation they had had so many years before on their last day on the road.

That afternoon of their last gig together, the man and the woman had taken a walk. The man, who never allowed himself to be seen alone in public with the woman, had walked easily that day. They

knew they were in the smallest town in the farthest reaches of nowhere and nothing they did mattered.

They had walked the streets, unknown to them, finding, eventually, the dusty, narrow streets on the edge of town, that no one had ever bothered to name.

"We have the road," the woman said. "When we're on the road, we're okay."

"I can't leave her," he said. "I know it sounds stupid. I don't love her."

"If that's true, you have to leave her. For everybody's sake."

"I told her the other night." The man stopped, putting his hands to his face. "I told her I consider her nothing more than a patron."

"What did she say?"

"She said it didn't matter."

The woman put her arms around the man. "Don't worry," she had said. "Don't worry."

The man's breath was warm on the woman's neck. "I'm beginning to think," he said, "it would be better that way."

"What way?"

"If I went back to her," he said, looking up. "I don't know if we can survive out here alone."

"If we were together," the woman had always wanted to tell him, "we wouldn't be alone." But the man was not listening -- not back then he had not listened, and certainly not that day with the divorce papers in his hand.

The woman had taken the memory of this conversation to bed with her that night, carrying it deep in the pit of her stomach. All that night she dreamt highway and water dreams.

The water dreams were simple -- first, she found herself in water too deep, then she drowned. But the highway dreams were elaborate in-color visions of cars losing control and colliding with other cars. The woman would wake, shaken, noting by the glow of the digital clock that only twenty minutes had passed since the last dream.

Every time the woman fell back asleep, another dream began: anvils dropping through the roof of the car, crushing her beyond recognition; cars careening off the side of a mountain, dropping in a free fall as the woman sat inside, fully conscious it was a dream, unable to wake herself before she hit bottom.

It was also that night -- the night the divorce papers arrived -- that the phone calls had begun: the deep ring in the middle of the night, the woman instinctually reaching out of her sleep for the receiver, the telephone crashing to the floor, and nothing on the other end of the line but the sound of waves.

"Hello," the woman's voice cracked, trying to sound awake.
"Hello."

The next morning after the long night of water and highway dreams, the woman had gone down to the dungeon while the man was in the shower and had found the legal papers tucked away on a shelf. She searched for the roman numeral and the orderly sub-heading in which she had been named as a complicating factor, a grounds for divorce.

The woman thought for a long time, about herself as a line in a legal document.

In stacks, all around her on the floor of the dungeon, was the man's neatly organized manuscript, the chronological history of the guitar, so painstakingly transcribed by the man. At first the woman just moved a few of the stacks around, into random and unexpected places. Nothing immediately noticeable, just a little chink in the armor, the woman thought.

But it felt so good, this simple act, that she went a little further. She put Black Sabbath before Segovia, Julián Bream after Eric Clapton. Finally she decided to throw the pages about Chuck Berry in the waste basket because she had never really liked his playing anyway.

That morning when the man had come out of the shower, the woman met him in the hallway. She told him she was going to start looking for a better job, a job that would support both of them. She said: "Take your time, heal up, rest, and don't worry about money."

"It's the least I can do," she said, "for destroying your life."

The woman had killed their first fish, Blue. It had been an accident, of course, something to do with the balance between acid and alkaline in the water.

She had thought a change would do him good. His water was getting cloudy and she thought he would appreciate it. But only

hours after she cleaned his tank and replaced the water, he had started to swim sluggishly and then, later, close to the surface. By the middle of the night, he was dead.

The man woke the woman to tell her she had killed Blue.

"Someone had to clean the tank." The woman said. "You weren't going to."

"I would have done it."

"I waited for two weeks for you to do it." The woman said. "You didn't do it."

"You didn't read anything, you didn't ask anyone." The man said. "You just did it."

"Well. You fed him too much." The woman said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You fouled the water. I just tried to clean it." The woman turned in the bed, pulling the covers tight around her body.

That night the woman slept fitfully, straining to screen out the steady barrage of notes the man feverishly played downstairs on his guitar. The man was working on the Greek modes. All night the Aeolian mode drifted up the staircase to the woman in her bed.

But the bittersweet sense of the mode was lost in the man's quickly moving fingers. The man was trying to play as fast as possible -- speed being everything in rock guitar. The woman, even in her sleep, could hear the mode twisting into something harsh and maniacal, winding its way like a crooked staircase up and down the neck of the man's guitar. The next morning, she found the first slim coffin on the kitchen counter.

She had not buried the first one either; she had thrown it in the garbage like all the others. The fish was dead, for god's sake, the woman thought. If he cared so much about where he ended up, he would have fought harder to live.

The day after she had killed Blue, the woman had returned to the pet store to pick out another blue fish and to get some advice from the attendant. But when she got there, the attendant was not working. There was, instead, a young blonde with a wingtip hairdo behind the counter who pleaded ignorance to any knowledge of beautiful fish who liked to annihilate each other. The wingtip lady, instead, directed the woman to a rack of reference materials where she found several books specifically about bettas.

On the way out, the woman went to the tanks and picked out the next biggest, bluest fish, noticing for the first time there were red bettas; the red ones were just as big and just as red as the blue ones were blue.

"See what it says about the red ones," the woman had asked the man that night as she finished the dishes. The man had been scouring the books all evening for a clue as to what had brought about Blue's demise.

"Let's see. Color." He checked the index. "It says, they breed them in Thailand for the color. They find a very blue female and a very blue male and they breed them, and hope for blue spawn which they will then, in turn, breed with other blue spawn."

"What about the red ones?" The woman asked.

"The same goes for the red. They're trying to breed the blue out of the red and the red out of the blue," the man said, "so they'll have just pure red and pure blue."

"Well." The woman said, sitting on the floor next to the tank. "They're doing a damn good job of it." She watched the new fish make his home in the clean water -- the new fish the man had decided to name Jonah.

"Well, they've been at it for a thousand years." The man continued to look in the book.

"That's a lot of lives of a lot of fish."

"Especially if they belong to you," said the man.

"I didn't kill him on purpose." The woman leaned back on her elbows. "I swear."

She smiled. "Tell me again. How is it they mate?"

"Well." The man set the book down. "They drop the female into the tank and hope that he doesn't kill her."

"Really," the woman said, amused.

"Of course." The man fingered the woman's buttons. "The females are very plain and not much of a threat. Just like in all the other species."

"Just like in some of the other species." The woman corrected.

"And then, before she knows what hit her." The man grabbed the woman's legs, pulling them tight up to her chest. "He pounces on her."

The woman lay on the floor, laughing. "And then if she survives all that?" She said, "then what happens?"

"The pouncing? If she survives the pouncing?" The man was breathing hard from the effort of holding the woman down. "Then they've got to snatch her right out of the water. Right out. Or else for sure, he'll kill her right there. Right on the spot."

At this point, the man lifted the woman high in the air and dropped her on the couch, falling on top of her. The couch groaned and creaked on impact. The man and the woman lay there laughing, trying to work their hands into the best position for whatever might come next.

"And the babies." The woman said. "What happens to the babies?"

"Oh." The man nudged the woman's neck. "He eats them."

The woman looked at the man to see if he was serious. "How do they survive?"

"It's the water." he said. "The water where they live is muddy. It goes on all the time. The females slip away. The spawn grow up. The males hardly ever have to fight, when they're in the dark water."

"Interesting," the woman said, close to the man's ear. "Tell you what, since we don't have any females, let's say from now on, we call the red ones mine, and the blue ones yours."

"A competition?" The man smiled, intrigued. "But what does the winner get?"

"You hog," the woman said, pulling the man closer. "Isn't winning enough for you?"

"Never."

"How about we decide later."

"I want to know now," said the man. "I want to know what I get."

"Later," the woman insisted. "For now, just turn off the light."

"What?"

"The light. Could you turn it off." The woman said.

Some mornings if she has time, the woman takes the long way to work, driving along an old road that winds gently around the north side of town.

On those days, she watches the houses, the trees, the homemade windmills pass by her like images in a movie. Sometimes she imagines what it might be like to live in one of those houses, to have a garden and a clothesline -- to lock the door at night and shut off the lights and go to sleep -- but most of the time the woman simply enjoys the view, the tight vacuum of quiet inside the car.

Sometimes, if the road is especially deserted, she ventures to sing. She belts out a few notes of her own. They have a weak and thin sound to them, like the first water out of a newly opened water pipe. She knows they don't sound very good.

But, hey, she thumbs the guy on the radio, "You should'a heard me in my prime."

If another car happens to pull up next to her, she bobs her head and fiddles with the dial, as if she's singing along with the radio, but she never really sings along with the radio. Mostly she sings alone, any song that comes to mind, trying to make her voice sound thick and gravelly like it did when she was on the road.

She had tramped through twenty-seven states to pick up that deep sound, that loose gravel in her voice. But a few years after coming off the road her voice had returned to its high thin fine shape.

The throat specialist had marveled at the amazing recuperative powers of her vocal cords. But the woman hated the natural sound of her voice, preferring instead the sound she had worked so hard to find.

Still, the throat specialist had informed her (as if she hadn't known/would be shocked to find out) that she was a woman, born to sound like a woman, and therefore not to sound like a man. She was fortunate, he cautioned her, to have gotten her voice back at all, after the way she had ground the gears of her throat down to nothing. But her real voice no longer fit her, not after all the distance she had covered.

That voice in this body, the woman imagines telling the throat specialist one day, is like one of those used cars you see on the lot occasionally: real sharp on the outside, no major dings in the leather, but the 30,000 on the odometer is really 130,000 and nobody knows it yet, but the whole thing is rotting slowly from the inside out.

Sometime after they lost their fifth or sixth fish, the man and the woman began to keep a piece of cardboard between the tanks to spare them the constant harassment of one another's presence.

"Do you think they know they're divided by glass?" The woman asked the man after one frenzied evening of posturing.

"I don't think they have the capacity to discern." The man said. "I think, at this point, it's all instinct."

"Imagine having to be on guard all the time."

"I'm sure." The man said. "It's the oldest part of the brain. The part that's always waiting for the attack."

He tapped the glass lightly. "I wonder if they don't wish for it sometimes. For the feel of flesh against flesh." He said. "For the end of it."

The woman did not want to discuss this with the man, but she was certain she had begun to recognize a pattern in the way these fish lived and in the way they died.

After two fish had been together for a time, it became clear that a pecking order had been established between them. The stronger fish continued to swim aggressively, policing his borders, baiting the other fish, who was then expected to respond in kind, and who, for the sake of pride, did. But, the woman thought, it was only shadow play.

The dominant fish interested the woman very little, because they always survived in the same way. The dying fish fascinated her more, because although they were dying, they did so in such an interesting variety of ways.

There were the ones that hung close to the surface, taking little gulps of air from above the water line. There were the sinkers, who fell, weighted, to the aquarium floor like grounded-out submarines. There were starvers, and droopers, and the ones that caught, or were caught by, parasites: their stomachs bloating, their eyes popping, their skin developing lesions.

But there was something else the woman could not discuss with the man: the way in which he seemed to be systematically eliminating her red fish.

The woman couldn't be sure how many of her fish had been lost in this way, perhaps only a few (the man was always heartbroken and grief stricken the next morning) but one night the woman, restless and unable to sleep, had quietly slid downstairs to watch the man.

She had been careful to stay on the outside edge of the steps, away from the middle of the third and seventh steps which creaked when stepped on. She was edging her way carefully down the banister, barely breathing, when she saw the man fishing her red beauty out of the water, his gills gulping and convulsing in the net.

The blue fish by nature were stronger, more able to survive than the red, it seemed, but this additional handicap had made the attrition rate among the woman's red fish alarmingly high. They had run through the tank like water down the drain, barely lasting long enough to be distinguished one from the other, certainly not long enough to be named.

It was not worth fighting over, the woman decided. Somewhere in the middle of the night all fish would eventually come to the same end: in the man's net, floating belly-up. But for a time, the woman thought, they were dying in a variety of ways.

The day after Santiago, the woman finds herself perched on an examination table for a long time, waiting for the doctor to arrive who will show her a picture, or give her the name for the dark worm that's been tunneling its way inside her.

The pain has a traveling quality, now an ache in her left breast, now a pinch in her right side, now a sharpness in her back. It's an elusive, tricky pain, migrating to whatever part of the body is not handled by the specialist who is testing her on any given day.

Years before when the woman was a singer, she had awoken every morning impulsively humming to check the state of her throat, to make sure she was still in voice after a long night of singing. But these days the woman wakes and immediately monitors the new place where pain has found her body.

"How's your voice?" The band members used to ask her every morning over breakfast when they were on the road. "Are you in voice."

"In pain," the woman thinks of telling the doctor today, "I am in pain."

Unlike her voice back in those days, however, the woman's pain is always there. More dependable, she thinks, than anything she's ever known. Certainly deserving of a name.

"Aneurysm," she rolls the word around, the vowels gliding and shifting like marbles inside her mouth. "An-e-ur-y-sm," the woman sounds it out, a word like a booby trap, the many vowels set to detonate on contact.

The woman tries out the few words she knows: "Cancer," the hard 'k' cracking like a nut in her jaw; "Melanoma," this word sounding too much like a passing bad mood than anything serious; "Polyps," she pops the 'p' imagining them growing like wild mushrooms in her large intestine.

She fantasizes about the name of her disease -- a long word, no doubt, difficult to spell, impossible to pronounce -- ringing fatally from the doctor's lips, perhaps taking two or three doctors working together to fully articulate it.

The woman spends the majority of the time between examination and prognosis, admiring how clean the walls are, listening to the Muzak and the faint hum of the fluorescent lights, acutely aware of the shiny stainless steel instruments resting in a neat row on the moveable table beside her.

Her clothes hang limply from a peg on the wall.

The woman stays there, as instructed, poised between stirrups on the padded bed. The paper gown they have given her has no backside so she moves little. When she attempts to shift her weight, the

sheet of disposable white paper beneath her ribs. The woman doesn't worry; the paper comes off a roll on the end of the bed, neat like a paper tower. After she's gone, the nurse will come in and tear off the length where she's been lying.

"Well, you're not dying," the doctor knocks and enters. He and his colleagues have, over the last hour, grown amused by this woman, so obviously healthy, who has insisted they run test after test on her: blood tests, urine tests, a liver analysis, x-rays, a breast exam in which a mysterious lump she had claimed to own, proved to be nonexistent.

This morning he has probed all the woman's orifices, poked her gall bladder, listened to her lungs, checked her blood pressure, taken her temperature, and, in all that time, found nothing significantly wrong.

"The lump isn't there today," the woman says, "but it is there some days." She puts her right hand over her left breast. "And sometimes it hurts."

"The female body is an amazing organism," the young doctor says. "It could just be a small node that gets a little clogged. Nothing to worry about."

This new breed of doctors, the woman thinks with disgust: young, sensitive, not willing to give you a weighty name or an expensive pill for your illness.

"You're perfectly healthy," the doctor rests his hand on the woman's knee.

"Jesus." The woman breathes. "Imagine that." She stares at her purple toes. A worm so silent, so invisible, even the best minds of medicine cannot detect it.

It's only in the movies, the woman has often thought, that people get easy answers for their problems, and only because something definite must happen in the course of those two dark hours in the theater. People have paid good money after all. They would rebel, throw popcorn, ask for their money back if the answer were not found.

In real life, the woman thinks, this is the way it always works, silent, gradual, without a name.

"You can get dressed now," the doctor tells the woman. "We've got sick people to attend to."

The evening after Santiago, the woman enters the apartment quietly. She has been to the mall, but instead of fish or books about fish, she has bought clothes.

The woman has been keeping a secret savings account for the man, a fund for after she's gone. On days when she's convinced she's dying, the woman deposits every cent she has into the account. On days, when she feels like she might be around for a few more months, she goes out and spends a little on herself. The account balance is like a rising and falling barometer of her health: one day, one thousand dollars, the next day, five hundred.

Every time the woman thinks about buying something she asks herself: will I have the chance to wear this black skirt? Can I justify spending this kind of money on a silk blouse for the back of a dead woman?

When she gets home, the woman finds, luckily, that the man is downstairs in the dungeon giving a guitar lesson. The man has excellent hearing. Sometimes, the woman believes, he can hear her coming, two blocks away, shopping bags crinkling in the car. The woman attempts to make it upstairs without making a sound. She tiptoes, holding the bags away from her body like dirty diapers.

"What'd you buy?" The man asks from behind.

"Oh," the woman says, vaulting the steps. "Nothing."

The man follows. "Well, you got something."

"There was a sale." The woman picks through a bag. She holds a skirt up to her body. "Sixty percent off." She lies.

The man wrinkles his nose. The skirt is pink. Everything in the bag is pink. He turns to go downstairs.

"What do you have to do tonight?" The woman asks.

"Some lessons," the man says, "and after that, chapter fourteen."

The man goes down the steps back to the dungeon, not stopping long enough to hear the woman say, "Oh."

The woman has little to look forward to, the evening after Santiago. With her new pink clothes hung neatly in the closet and the man busy with his students and Chapter fourteen, she takes out the book she

has just bought -- the book that inspired the man to name their last fish Santiago.

"The greatest fish story ever told," is the way the man had described it, "told by a great fisherman."

Throughout the evening, as the woman reads she can hear the slow trickle of guitar students as they make their way through her front door, into her kitchen and down the steps to the dungeon where they pay the man to torture them into becoming better guitarists.

They continue to come all evening like ants on a food trail. Over the years the woman has seen an endless stream of faces, rushing through her front door to get to the man downstairs. They are not real people, the woman is convinced, they are clones, and clones of clones.

She can tell this by their drawn and faded composition. Certainly their disguises are convincing -- the ripped jeans, the slim hips, the no-ass-to-speak-of. They carry tattered guitar cases like real guitarist, and they have the seriously-big hairstyles, but the woman is still not convinced.

The woman is curious enough about the origin of these boys that she makes a point of being there at the end of the month when their mothers come inside to pay the man for the next month's lessons. These women, the mothers, are short and squat. They wear pixie cuts and down-filled jackets that give them the appearance of neat, little stuffed sausages.

But the woman is not fooled. These women are not the real mothers. Who is, the woman really wants to know, producing these boys?

She continues to read the fish story late into the night, long after the trickle has stopped and the man has resumed work on the Fourteenth Chapter of his life.

The fish story is a short book, cleanly written, but, the woman thinks, it is not a fish story at all.

If the author of the fish story were still alive, he might argue that the woman is much like those ladies who attended bull fights in his time -- always feeling bad about the horses and the bulls, never concerned for the toreador -- and it's true, the woman finds herself sympathizing with this big, dense fish.

The woman reads the fish story wanting, the whole time, for the fish to stop swimming, to recognize the hook in his mouth and to retrace the line back to the hands of the man who insists on calling him "Brother" while killing him.

When the Old Man says, "Fish, don't go deep." The woman whispers, "Go deep, fool, go deep." And when the Old Man says, "Come up now, friend, fill your lungs with air." The woman begs the fish to stay where he is.

But the marlin does not listen to her; it's apparent that he and the Old Man have their own agenda. The woman falls asleep with the book resting open on her belly.

That night she dreams she's in a large dressing room, trying on a red velvet dress with a revealingly low neckline. Vaguely she understands she will wear the dress to some ball she will attend later in her dream.

After all the zippers, buttons and snaps are closed, an attendant approaches her from behind and places a long ermine cloak on her shoulders. The cloak is heavy and plush with a train going as far back as the mirror can reflect.

Delighted, the woman attempts to move in the dream, to model the outfit for the attendant, but the weight of the cloak pulls at her, keeping her in place.

"You're standing on the train," the woman tells the attendant.
"You must get off."

"It's too long for you," the attendant asserts. "It's too heavy." As the attendant speaks, her voice gets low and sleepy, wavering almost to a halt like the sound of a record slowing down.

"You must let it drop," the attendant advises her.

And with this the woman reaches for her throat, for the delicate clasp that holds the weight of the cloak on her back, and she releases it.

In the middle of the night after Santiago, the woman wakes. She smells the smell, faint and humid in her bedclothes and wonders if it will be with her always, the dark tapeworm, eating the food she eats, sleeping her sleep.

In the land of the sick, the woman thinks, health seems like another country.

The woman finds the book about the fish and the Old Man resting open beside her, tangled in the blankets. She flips through the book, searching for those few pages where Santiago, however fleetingly, had a moment of triumph: right after he catches the fish, and right before the sharks come to take everything away.

The woman rips those few happy pages out of the book and re-inserts them somewhere near the beginning, like an errata, fixing everything. Now the fish rests easily on the old man's skiff, making the long journey home. The wind is at his back.

The old man simply overslept. It was all a dream. Even his old wife sleeps quietly beside him in his bed.

That night after Santiago, when the phone rings it has an urging quality, a nocturnal harbinger. The woman snatches up the receiver, pressing it tightly to her ear.

"Hello," she says to the other end of the line, "this is Leah. This is Leah speaking."

The receiver remains mute, shushing like an ocean, taking everything, giving nothing.

Leah imagines that other woman, halfway across the country in another bed, unable to sleep, dialing every night this great distance she can never hope to speak across.

"I was not asleep," Leah says, listening for a long time into the hissing silence, for the echo, for the return.

Leah hangs up the receiver and gets out of bed. She looks out the window to the empty street below.

Amazing, she thinks, how calm it grows in the middle of every night.

The man is in the dungeon. The woman knows from the depth of silence in the house that he is in his darkest brood of the night.

Bad news looms, no doubt, on the horizon, but the man will get no bad news from her tonight.

He has grown bored with her dreams, anyway, her complaints of phantom pains shooting through her body.

These days he is interested only in the ample curve of his guitar, in running his fingers as quickly as possible over the smooth grid of her thin neck -- playing in the Phrygian, playing in the Dorian mode.

SHIT & THE DREAM OF IT

All the arts derive from
this ur-act of making.

-- W.H. Auden

i was knee-deep in my dad's polebarn,
below zero for two weeks, the milk cows
couldn't go outside, we just spread straw
over the freshest layer and hoped
for warmer weather, i was breaking open
those straw bales speading them wide
with a pitchfork when I said, hey,
i'm breaking out of this hellhole.
but how far can you get? they say
little kids stand by the toi-toi
and wave bye-bye as the new thing
they made swirls away, it's a stage
they go through, i never went through
stages, i just hopped into whatever
had keys and hauled ass, listen,
there's no escaping it, last night
i dreamed i was naked on a commode
in the middle of a room full of high-up
mucky-mucks drinking wine from some year
better than this one. the stool,
turns out, is an avant garde exhibit
of which i am a part. i'm in the center
trying to produce those gems
they like, those necessary nuggets. i cry
for paper, a curtain to wrap around me,
but they say, no, they're interested

SHIT & THE DREAM OF IT -2

in process. process, i tell them,
my ass. my dad tried to warn me
that day i was peeling out the driveway,
wherever you go, he said, you'll find it.
i don't mean to run on like this,
but he was right, one time,
at a party in the seventies some guy
took a crap on the livingroom carpet,
tripping on acid, he mistook himself
for the family dog, he smelled that scent
and went for it. you might want to say
it was the times, but listen,
i have plenty of relatives planted
in a hill just north of my home town
who will tell you the rotten truth,
everything turns to it,
just ask the worms
they'll give you
the straightest poop.

INTENT TO RETURN

Once a week when I was a kid, my parents forced me to watch Lawrence Welk. This did not take as many years of therapy to overcome as one might imagine.

Every Saturday night after supper -- that's what we called the evening meal back then, what my parents still call it, but what my sisters and I who have all moved away now call "dinner" -- our hands flew over the dirty dishes, rushing to watch that first sight of bubbles floating up from behind Lawrence Welk's bandstand, to hear those first yippy tones of clarinets.

What we suffered from back then was a lack of options. This was, after all, the early '60s: black and white television, pre-pre-cable. We only had two channels.

And what was on that other channel? Marlin Perkins and all those slipperly-tongued reptiles? I have no idea, because my parents never considered changing the channel after Lawrence Welk came on. These were pre-remote days as well, no grazing.

We watched the commercials, the "Sponsors" as they were so reverently called back then -- Geritol, Sominex, Aqua Velva -- with the same interest as we watched the show. These were the people, after all, who were paying good money out of their own pockets for Lawrence to be on TV. The least we could do was hear what they had to say.

Even all these years later if I am searching through the channels and I happen upon "The Lawrence Welk Show" -- it appears we now have him in re-runs unto infinity thanks to Public Television and "viewers like you" -- I am caught. I must once again sit down and watch the "musical family" in action.

All those old-fashioned, song-and-dance pieces where the boy gets fresh and the girl crosses her arms and huffs a bit to show how properly miffed she is.

All those smiling women heavily coiffured in the bionic flip that was so popular in the early '60s even though it was, no doubt, highly flammable and a danger to the ozone. Every woman on the show pretty in that such-a-very-nice-girl way, all swaying in a straight line of flowing chiffon.

And those fresh faced men marching in place, swinging their arms in time to patriotic anthems, all wearing matching polyester suits made up in those colors never to be found in nature.

And behind it all lurks Lawrence, the maestro puppeteer, baton in hand, smiling ingratiatingly at the camera, accent in tow, his odd syllables grazing over difficult words.

Even back then when I was a kid and forced to like it, those too-cute-for-television introductions struck me as amazingly corny. To Lawrence it seemed everyone was "nice" (pronounced nize), "very talented" and, of course, "wunnerful."

And even back then, as my parents exclaimed over how smooth this dancer was, or how good that singer was, I was never fooled for one minute. I knew that Lawrence Welk was no Benny Goodman, no Count Basie -- even though I had never even heard of these people -- no Guy Lombardo, no Duke Ellington, no Louis Armstrong.

Even back then I sensed that Lawrence Welk was a rough facsimile of something. What, I did not know. But I had a vague impression that real singers and real dancers and real musicians performed with an intensity not to be found on "The Lawrence Welk Show." Sweat poured from the brows of real performers, oblivious to their audience. The Welk "musical family" seemed too happy to be there on television performing. And they were always looking straight into the lens of the camera, too aware of me, the viewer, for my comfort.

Although I don't recall anyone telling me that it was necessary to suffer for one's art, instinctively, I looked for suffering and found no evidence of angst on the Welk Show. No creative demons were being exorcised there on Saturday night TV, no one struggling against the forces of censorship and poverty.

And the accordion was a big tip-off. No for-real bandleader, I figured, played the accordion. Even in my provincial innocence I was fairly certain of that.

But -- here's the sad part -- continue to watch we did. Because we were from south-central North Dakota, a mere 30 miles from Strasburg, Welk's hometown. Because Welk was the most famous person from North Dakota (aside from Peggy Lee who didn't count because she

was from the eastern part of the state and as the folks back home used to say "a whole other story entirely"). But mostly we watched because, my father insisted, we were related to Lawrence Welk.

"A distant relative," he assured us, "a shirt-tail cousin," but nevertheless still "related."

There was some evidence of this relation. We got Christmas cards from him every year (along with thousands of other people no doubt) and, in his early career when my father was still a young boy, Welk was purported to have played dances on our farm in a barn that had stood at the foot of the hill.

Even though this mytho-historic barn was no longer there -- it had long since been razed and a new barn was built on the top of the hill -- we found enough traces of the old barn: fragments of old wood shingles, horseshoes and rusty nails, to accept the veracity of our father's claims.

Years later when I checked the genealogy it turned out that Welk was, in fact, my paternal grandmother's first cousin (which made him my first cousin twice-removed, if you know how to figure these things out). But, aside from being the most famous person from North Dakota, what was more important about Welk is that he was one of us: we, of a little known tribe called the Germans-from-Russia whom every history book seems to have forgotten.

Our ancestors had spent over 150 years emigrating from country to country: from Alsace-Lorraine, on the ever-changing border between France and Germany; then to the Steppes of Russia where Catherine the Great promised farm land and freedom from military service; then, around the turn of this century, to America after the fall of the imperial regime made survival for ethnic minorities impossible in Russia.

In my own childlike way growing up, I understood this to mean that we German-Russians were an earnest hardworking bunch with an amazingly low threshold for bullshit. We could accept the wrath of God easily enough, but as soon as governments and armies started to mess with us, we pulled up stakes and moved on.

But we were not a fortuitous people. In fact, our ancestors seemed to have an uncanny knack for settling down in places where armies and invading hordes were most likely to tread: flat, rolling land, marginally good for farming, excellent for advancing troops. We had, needless to say, done our fair share of migrating.

My grandparents were children when they made the crossing to America with their parents; my maternal grandfather was the last to come over in 1911 at the age of twelve. Farmers by trade and temperament, the Germans-from-Russia, quickly scurried to the isolation of the Dakota Territory, taking up claims for virgin land.

But they were also seeking the obscurity of rural places. Since most adult men had fled Russia to escape induction into the Russian Army after Catherine's Edict promising freedom from military service

was rescinded, they were convinced (had been convinced while in Russia) that the long arm of the Russian military was indeed long enough to find them anywhere in the world they chose to run to.

It was not unusual for many German-Russian emigres to change their names for the crossing when they left Russia, and then change their names back once they got to Ellis Island, hoping to further obscure the trail -- a maddening development for those attempting to trace family histories back through numerous countries and continents all these many years later.

For this reason there was a shroud of mystery that hung around my grandparents' and my great-grandparents' generation regarding the place where they had come from: Russia, that cold closed country, our adopted country's mortal enemy, and a place where no one ever went on vacation.

And back then, my grandparents, life-long immigrants, only visitors in this country, struck me as amazingly odd and foreign, with their harsh accents, and their only-German-between-them, and their all-white cuisine (consisting mainly of potatoes, dough and onions) that looked like nothing anybody on television ever ate.

Further, they made little attempt to explain their origins. "Odessa," my grandmother would say in a perturbed voice when I bugged her long enough. "We all came from Odessa." And as they died off one-by-one, this town, Odessa, appeared on the back of their memorial cards as a place of birth.

I later found out that even this was not true. Odessa, that Black Sea port city that I stared at for hours in the atlas, had been nothing more than their point of departure, like New York City might be for us if we were traveling to Europe.

According to them, Russia was a nightmare, best not talked about, even better forgotten. And we, the third and fourth generations, have suffered the consequences of trying to extract answers from the repressed and failing memories of the first and second generation immigrants who are all now, for the most part, gone.

Even in the 1930s and '40s when their crossing experiences should have been fresh in their minds, Germans-from-Russia had a way of confounding inquiries about emigration. WPA workers sent all over the country to interview new immigrants met up with such profound aphasic responses from German-from-Russians that they turned in frustration and sought out more loquacious immigrants.

Most of this century, after all, has not been a good time to be either German or Russian. "If you said you were German," my grandmother once told me, "they called you 'kraut.' If you said you were Russian, they called you a 'rooskie'." By choice they became the people of silence.

And thus, my ancestors, a tribe seeking the protection of remote places rightly found their way to the middle of what was soon to become North Dakota, a forgotten state in a seemingly forgotten

region, the Great Plains of the American Midwest, a place where, it seemed to me as a kid growing up in the early 1960s, nothing of import ever had, or ever would happen.

A few years ago in a cartoon published in USA Today, two men are sitting at a bar. The one is looking at the other and saying, "You know, I've never met anyone from North Dakota either."

From this one line it's possible to extrapolate backward and imagine the conversation these two men were having. The one, a bit tipsy perhaps and high on imagination as cartoon characters tend to be is proposing to the other that North Dakota is not really there, an Orwellian trick the Union has played on itself. Case-in-point: Have you ever met anyone from North Dakota?

What we have is an image problem, a fact that was verified in the late '80s when the state commissioned a study, called Vision 2000 which determined that most North Dakotans suffer from a sense of low self-esteem.

The only time, it seems, the rest of the country hears about us is when bizarre fringe groups like the tax-protesting Posse Comitatus, hidden away in our far recesses overreacts to government controls and blows away a few FBI agents, or when our name is picked out of the air by some comedian who needs a corny sounding state name to flavor a weak punchline.

Just the other day, for example, listening to a report on NPR, I heard it happen. A commentator was complaining about "the new Prague," hailed by some as the "Paris of the '90s." Because of these glowing reports, the commentator had gone to Prague and found out that the overpriced housing and the stuffed-to-occupany restaurants and the grey, dirty buildings were all too dismal for him to recommend to any American traveler.

"To say that Prague is the Paris of the '90s," he said setting the record forever straight with a cynical east coast snort, "is like saying Fargo, North Dakota is the New York City of the '90s."

Fargo, North Dakota. Well, I guess he made his point.

Back in 1989 when our state legislature was wrestling with the question of whether or not to drop the "North" from North Dakota and simply call the state "Dakota," the headline that ran in the Wall Street Journal read: "Would a Rose Smell as Sweet if its Name was North Dakota?"

The tourism bureau had determined that most people associated the word "North" with cold and flat -- two images that we as a state (or the state's tourism bureau anyway) naturally wanted to be disassociated from.

"It may sound ridiculous," the article read, "that a state riddled with towns named Zap and Judd and Gackle would say that its own name lacks warmth."

Trying to be helpful, no doubt, the Journal reporter even enlisted the aid of Frank Delano, chairman of Delano, Goldman &

Young, a high-priced New York City consulting firm that has had its hand in renaming such big companies as Unisys and Navistar.

"If North Dakotans want to present a warmer image to the world," the article reads, "Mr. Delano has another suggestion: Palm Dakota."

"You know, like Palm Springs," Mr. Delano says smugly.

In 1991, the New York Times reported that North Dakota was the last state in the union to rescind its no Sunday shopping law -- a close, controversial decision that sparked many heated debates about what might happen to "church attendance." Even before the ink was dry on the new bill, the Times reported, concerned residents of the state were busy combing the countryside for enough signatures to turn the issue back around to a state ballot.

This list of grievances, slights against the good name of North Dakota, which no doubt has begun to read like a foreshortened and petty version of Luther's ninety-five theses, preys on the already fragile ego of every North Dakotan. We collect these episodes, licking our wounds in private, making a mental note, keeping an obsessively detailed log of these small infractions, as those who are powerless tend to do.

Take the time a few years ago when Rand McNally, those conscientious map makers who so efficiently keep track of every obscure country in the world, every changing border, every revised spelling of every new territory, neglected to include North Dakota in their 1989 Photographic World Atlas. (They left out South Dakota and Oklahoma too, but that didn't make North Dakota feel any better.

Having low self-esteem, we take this kind of thing personally.) The Times article read, "Rand McNally Covers all 47 States."

"It was an editorial decision," Conroy Erickson, Rand McNally's public relations director said in response to heated inquiries from Dakotans.

"Now that this has come up," Erickson apologized, "we realize that this was not a good idea."

In 1990, North Dakotans faced another public humiliation when President Bush himself took the time and trouble in a press conference on national television (it was also re-broadcast on the nightly news) to single out and condemn a \$500,000 rural development grant for North Dakota that had recently been passed in Congress -- a grant intended, ironically enough, to preserve Lawrence Welk's childhood sod home and the original Welk homestead as a historical site. Bush labeled it "the worst example of pork barrel politics" he had seen for quite some time.

"I mean we all like Lawrence Welk," Bush said, bending his knees and making a little oompa motion, "but this is ridiculous." Bush, usually not a very funny guy, made everyone at the press conference laugh that day.

I'm sure even Lawrence Welk laughed at this. He was still alive back then and he was a multi-millionaire. As my father used to say when I made fun of Lawrence's corny accent: "He laughs all the way to the bank with that." And apparently he did.

Nobody was better at making fun of Lawrence than he himself. The text from his first autobiography Wunnerful, Wunnerful, reads with the understated charm of a consummate self-deprecator.

Commenting, for example, on the names of his early bands, Welk says:

I don't know which was the worst title: "Lawrence Welk and his Hotsy Totsy Boys," " Welk's Novelty Orchestra," or "Lawrence Welk and his Honolulu Fruit Orchestra."

"The boys," he goes on to explain, "complained about them all."

A poster reproduced in the photo pages at the center of Wunnerful, Wunnerful, features another of Lawrence Welk's bands -- "America's Biggest Little Band" -- which showcased a brass player named Leo Fortin, who could apparently blow "two trumpets at once," as well as a multi-talented trombonist, Terry George, who could play a "rousing rendition of 'Nola' with his foot."

The poster includes photos of both of them: Fortin with his cheeks big as apples, his face stuffed with trumpets; and George bouncing on one leg, his right foot slung into the curve of his trombone, playing "Nola," no doubt.

"Superhuman Performance Acts" the poster says in large bold letters.

"These two always stopped the show," Lawrence reports with obvious pride.

Self-abnegation abounds in Wunnerful, Wunnerful. Under a beautiful picture of the elegant Trianon Ballroom in Chicago, for example, where his band reportedly played successfully for over ten years, Welk writes: "The side stage, barely visible at the left, is where visiting bands would engage us in a 'Battle of the Bands.'"

"We usually lost!" Welk feels it necessary to report.

In another photo in the center pages of Wunnerful, Wunnerful, above a promo picture of "America's Biggest Little Band," Welk has written: "You can see why they quit me!"

This episode, the painful story of Welk's first organized band telling him at breakfast one morning in the '20s that they were all moving on without him, because he "still bounce[d] around like [he was] playing at a barn dance, and [he couldn't] even speak English," is told in the painful chapter titled: "My Band Walks Out."

It is this forthrightness, this willingness to state everything right out, to sing with a clear voice for entertainment's sake that makes my aesthetic cringe whenever I come in contact with "The Lawrence Welk Show."

I don't recall anyone teaching me this, but at an early age I began to feel a sense of aesthetic about music and especially singing. Separating every singer I heard into two categories, I began to identify "singers" and "vocalists." According to my definitions, singers sang nice songs, nicely, and you could understand every word of the lyrics.

Vocalists, on the other hand, massaged the musical line, the notes pouring out of them like a fluid animal, the words becoming inconsequential.

In my estimation, there were no vocalists on "The Lawrence Welk Show," only milquetoast singers. No one bordered on chaos, with the possible exception of Jo Ann Castle who didn't last very long for precisely that reason. Viewers wrote in and complained about what a sloppy player she was. Even Welk's one minority representative, an African-American named Arthur, who did a great tap, was too manageably light-skinned, too personable.

In other words, there was no "attitude" to be found on "The Lawrence Welk Show." No cool.

Real players, in my mind, teased the melody. They rushed ahead, then hesitated, then let it all out at once. Welk's musicians played their lines a measure at a time -- like conservatives saving a little money every week in the bank -- straight as (perhaps straighter than, but is this possible?) Muzak.

In fashion, Welk's aesthetic translated into flouncy bows and neat, cinched waists: everyone looking as freshly-scrubbed and neat for the camera as possible.

"Man, are they good!" my father used to exclaim. "Everybody on this show always looks so neat!" This was my parents' aesthetic on parade every Saturday night. When The Beatles appeared on the "Ed Sullivan Show" a few years later I recall my father being appalled.

How could these messy, noisy guys get on television? He left the room in the middle of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" to go to the bathroom. Coming back after The Beatles were done, he told us he had flushed the whole bunch down the toilet. In my father's estimation that night, The Beatles had no future; they were a done deal.

There is a gravel road that leads out of my parents' farm about a half-mile long which leads to another gravel road about a mile long that eventually meets up with a paved, two-lane highway. When I was a kid, I used to sit for hours in my brother's bedroom (his window faced the highway) and keep a running tally of how many cars and trucks passed our farm on the road: color, make, model (if I could recognize it) and whether or not the vehicle was going north or south.

I yearned for movement back then, for escape. From watching TV and listening to the radio, I got sketchy messages about the world that was out there, but I wanted more than anything to get out there too. I spent a lot of time walking back then, restless, aimless walking, down the gravel roads, along the dusty section lines, always kicking stones, always walking with my head down, searching for some remnant, some trace that travelers had passed through here, that previous residents had inhabited our little strip of land.

I drew maps with large Xs on them marking the spot where lost treasure surely would be found. I looked for chipped arrowheads, a

stone carving, an agate, even an unusual rock formation -- anything that might prove to me that someone or something, even if a nomadic tribe, or an ancient glacier had passed through before me.

Passing through. That seems to be what North Dakota is best for. We are flyover country. People pass through on the way to the lakes of Minnesota, the Black Hills of South Dakota, the skiing in Montana. Even North Dakota's children grow up and scatter in a kind of diaspora to all the other states in the union as soon as they become of age.

This land, so barren and unforgiving, the land my great-grandparents were given was not good, as it turned out, for much more than this roaming across. It is not a nurturing land. The people who live and work there have had to steel themselves against the harshness of the land, have had to develop a kind of fierceness. And, oddly enough, survival becomes a thing of pride and a source of deeper love for this unforgiving land. It's best not try to psychoanalyze this. North Dakotans -- those who still live within its borders as well as those who have scattered -- have a complex and conflicted relationship with their home state.

Perhaps this is why resounding protest was heard from many Dakotans, former and present, in the late 1980s when Deborah and Frank Popper, two urban planners who teach at Rutgers University and live in New Jersey, proposed that the Great Plains -- land west of the 98th meridian including North and South Dakota as well as parts of most central states -- be reconverted to a Buffalo Commons.

In the Poppers' opinion "settling the prairies was the largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental mistake in United States history." The plan, which came to the couple while they were "stuck in a six-lane traffic jam on the New Jersey Turnpike heading for Manhattan," suggests that the Great Plains should be turned back to its "original pre-white state" -- open prairie, grazing land for replenished herds of buffalo.

In a proposal to Planning Magazine, the Poppers identified the Great Plains as "an austere monument to American self-delusion" -- the naive belief that any land can be bent to the will of man. "We tried to force waterless, treeless steppes to behave like Ohio, and got three or four boom-and-bust episodes for our trouble," Frank Popper explains. Speaking of the Great Plains, Popper notes:

They have the nation's hottest summers and coldest winters, greatest temperature swings, worst hail and locusts and range fires, fiercest droughts and blizzards, and therefore its shortest growing season.

North Dakotans, in their dark, survivalist humor might answer these allegations by saying, "Yeah, well that's what we like about the place."

But the Poppers' proposal was not accepted with great humor. One irate resident of Billings, Montana sent a sprawling postcard to Planning Magazine, suggesting that we would consent to becoming a

Buffalo Commons "when New Jersey becomes one big parking lot for New York City."

One couple in Minot, North Dakota wrote a rebuttal to the Buffalo Commons article "using language that mocked the Poppers' proposal" recommending that "New Jersey's seven million people be relocated to the Great Plains" and "designating the northern part of the state a wilderness area." The Minot couple also proposed walling off the east coast and making it a gambling and drug-usage zone, reserving the rest of the state for "mega-airports" and parking lots for New York.

Granted, North Dakota natives would argue, life on the Plains is more blizzards and tornadoes than high culture and freeway traffic jams. And while all this bad press is not good for our egos or our tourism, "it keeps the riff-raff out," as so many Dakotans are fond of saying. For many people, it is an acceptable price to pay.

That half-mile stretch of gravel road leading out of my parents' farm is framed on either side by cottonwood trees that are over seventy feet tall. They have been there a long time; my great-grandfather planted them about eighty years ago, along with a long stretch of orchard when he settled this land.

The day that I became old enough to leave that place, I took a photograph of that view -- the long driveway stretching out to other roads and the high cottonwoods reaching up to the sky -- and I got

myself on that road and I did not look back, not for many years.

In the same way in 1924, Lawrence Welk woke up very early on the morning he turned 21. He was now free to pursue his musical career. He got dressed in an unfamiliar new suit that he had ordered especially for his departure.

I inspected the contents of my valise one more time, and counted my small hoard of money. I had enough for my train fare plus three one-dollar bills, which I pinned in my inside coat pocket, and a little loose change. I smoothed the patchwork quilt, which my mother had made, over my bed for the last time, and then looked around the room where I had spent so many hours with my brothers. I felt no unhappiness, only a great eagerness to begin my great adventure.

"So you're going," Welk's father said to him over the breakfast table. "Well, you'll be back. You'll be back just as soon as you get hungry."

"But I knew I would never return," Welk said. "I would never come back till I had proved myself."

Welk took the bus as far as his money would take him that day -- to Aberdeen, South Dakota, a mere 125 miles away from his hometown of Strasburg, but no easy distance considering where he had come from.

For myself, I have lived for the last twenty years as a kind of reluctant, ex-patriot North Dakotan, residing in bordering states, most of the time on the Minnesota border just barely across the Red River, close enough so that I can keep an eye on, but be free of North Dakota.

And all these years, I have gone through intricate machinations to keep my North Dakota residency. Odd, considering it is a state where seemingly nobody wants to live. Why I am doing this, I am still not really certain, but an attorney I consulted assures me that "intent to return" is adequate grounds for keeping residency in a state or country, even though one lives outside its borders for extended periods of time.

Our great-grandparents and grandparents spent their lives trying to work the land of the Great Plains; they lived and died pitting their own strong wills against its unrelenting harshness. And the testimony of their tragic lives, for the most part, proves the Poppers right: the settling of the Great Plains was, at best, a failed experiment.

But we, the surviving generations who were born and raised under the harsh tutelage of the Great Plains have found a fierce but loving taskmaster in it. By it we have been forged into a hearty breed, requiring little, expecting less, able to survive anywhere.

And no matter how far from that uncompromising land we drift, a long, sinewy root connects us, summoning us home from time to time, not with a song, but with a loud, brassy supper call.

WATCHING JOANN CASTLE PLAY

Saturday nights, before Mom and Dad
went to polka, we'd watch Lawrence Welk.

We'd watch Bobby throw Cissy and catch her.
Joe Feeney sang My Wild Irish Rose.

Arthur, the token black tap man clicked
across the stage. Lawrence emceeing

in that corny German accent my father
did not hesitate to remind us he laughed

all the way to the bank with. Everybody
singing, everybody swaying in chiffon

and sports coats, everybody smiling
those that's-entertainment-the-show-must-go-on-

there's-no-business-like-show-business smiles.
There was one woman we waited for and that

was Joann Castle. Joann Castle and her mile-high,
honey-blond beehive, and her big, big back

that never quite fit into her big backless gowns.
Joann Castle with her hands on the keys, playing

the honky tonk. As we watched from behind
Lawrence counted her off uh one and uh two and

away she would go, her bare arms flappin
her big bottom bouncin, she'd be jammin

WATCHING JOANN CASTLE PLAY -2

the keys, rappin, like tongues they was flappin.
When she turned to face the camera,

her pearly whites still tinklin
that ivory tune. Even the fogeys in the back row

felt inclined to say, Joann Castle, man.
She's been to Chicago. She's been to New York.

Shit man, I'll bet she's even been to New Orleans.

T O M B S T O N E S A L E S

This is the story I have been saving for when I became famous.

A long time ago, my booking agent Morrie Hoffnagel, who never gave me a good bit of advice in his whole worthless life, said to me, "Sal, you should keep a few good stories in your pocket like candy around Halloween time for the reporters, for after you make it in the bigs."

Good old Morrie. He figured people just eat up those stories about Sinatra living with cockroaches and Dylan starving and, you know, like Elvis buying a new car for everybody and his brother.

But like everything else Morrie ever gave me, his advice was about 40 years after the fact.

It was at Morrie's insistence that I worked up a profile. I'm a tequila drinker, Two Fingers, unless it's Dewars that's interviewing me. In that case, I'm a scotch drinker whose favorite author is Gunter Grass. And the last play I saw was something by Pinter, but I can never remember what. That response is supposed to get them every time, pique their interest. In answer to the question they invariably ask about the most unusual job you ever had before becoming famous, I tell them tombstone sales.

And that, oddly enough, is the only true and accurate part of the profile.

I should begin by saying that I never sold a goddamn one of them. Even though the tombstone company kept sending me the obituaries, my "leads" those neatly clipped notices of death. Even though I kept reading them. (I could never stop myself from reading them.) I never had the heart to go out and actually try to sell one.

The day I ran away from that lousy job, I got on the nearest road that looked like it led anywhere and I thumbed my way out. I never looked back. I had real talent in those days: a singing voice that sounded good even when I wasn't in the shower, a light touch on the keyboards, and a great smile.

"You can find better ways," I told myself, "to apply your talents." Great things, I thought to myself that day standing in the rain with my thumb in the air. "You are destined for great things."

As you may have already suspected: this wealth and fame business has been slow to materialize. All that's really left is these old stories that I picked up along the way, that I've dragged with me through every Holiday Inn I ever slept in and every fourth-rate nightclub I ever sang "Feelings" in, through all the late-night diners, and all the cars on all the roads I've ever driven. And there have been many of them, many more than I care to remember.

No more eight by ten glossies. Not even an interviewer to peel the layers of it from me. I am, myself, the only person who's any longer interested in these old stories.

I can't even guarantee the truth of it anymore. Although it's real as real can be to me.

The story, such as it is, begins with Mr. Brecker sitting at his kitchen table with his face in his hands the whole time we are trying to speak to him about a tombstone for his newly-departed wife.

It's not me talking, mind you. I am merely "observing." This is the word Jim Kelly uses to get us in the door after Mr. Brecker has opened to our knock, looking confused, wringing his hands. One tombstone salesperson he is expecting, not two.

Anything, Jim Kelly warns me, even the slightest little thing can throw these people off. It's a delicate situation at best, and I'm new on the job (a trainee, although Jim Kelly does not wish to trouble Mr. Brecker with that information). So, I am, as I said earlier, only observing.

Never trust the undertaker. This is the first lesson Jim Kelly tries to drill into my head. No matter what you do, never trust him. He may be wringing his hands with grief for you in the front room, but in the back room he's rubbing those thin, dry things together over the two hundred percent mark-up he's just applied to all your paraphernalia of death.

Never trust the undertaker's package deals -- the candle-lit vigils with the organ music playing softly in the background, the gold-plated coffins, the promise of shady plots and hand-carved tombstones -- all those painful details you'd rather pay through the nose to have taken care of ("arranged," as the undertaker says) than be forced to think twice about.

The undertaker understands, he understands perfectly. And that is precisely where he's sticking it to you.

Honoring the dead, that's what it's all about. But, Jim Kelly tells me time and time again, "never trust the undertaker." Better to trust the lowly tombstone salesman who comes to your front door with nothing in his hands but a warm handshake, a heavy sample case, and a genuine desire to save you some money.

Sitting at the dining room table with Mr. Brecker and Jim Kelly that day I take my job to heart. Jim has the samples out on the table. He's saying things like, "Yes, indeed, the rose quartz is quite remarkable," explaining about the price ranges and the origin of each sample. All the while, Mr. Brecker has his face in his hands. His grief has made him inconsolable, oblivious to any sales pitch.

"Observing," I tell myself watching Mr. Brecker unravel in front of us. "I am merely observing." I stay in my seat, but I take this opportunity to look around.

The house is a three-bedroom rambler, five, maybe ten years old. There's a modest brick fireplace in the living room. Some earth tone love seats. The dining room carpet is green and brown with geometric patterns. I am guessing, but I would be willing to bet that there's an unfinished family room downstairs with a ping pong table in it.

The two daughters, nine and eleven, or thereabouts, are beaming, braces and all, out of gold frames on the buffet. The coffee maker is tucked deep into its corner by the oven.

Everything is in order, but for one thing: what has become of Mrs. Brecker?

Perhaps this is what Mr. Brecker is wondering as he hides his face from us. He isn't a bad looking fellow, mid-thirties, still has quite a lot of his hair. With two daughters to look after, he should someday consider remarrying.

But this is nothing he wants to -- or should have to -- worry about today. Mrs. Brecker has been gone only a few short weeks, not even long enough for the linoleum to miss her.

And nobody is pressing Mr. Brecker. Jim Kelly is presenting basic information. I'm just sitting there, observing. "It's the very nature of the granite to force the hard questions." This little bit of wisdom I get from Jim Kelly in the car driving back to the front office later.

Honoring the dead, indeed.

Perhaps the question Mr. Brecker is wrestling with is how deeply should he bury himself with Mrs. Brecker -- single headstone or double?

Personally, it would give me the creeps to see my name on a tombstone with my own personal date of birth carved below it, and a dash and a little space left open after it, for that one unknown variable to be filled in, to complete my own sorry vintage, like a brick wall with only one little hole, one single brick missing.

"Single headstone or double, Mr. Brecker?" I think to myself, "My fingernails bleed for you."

As you can see, decisions in granite cannot be taken lightly. The stuff, after all, is expensive, and it's heavy. Once you get it in place, you shouldn't be changing things or trying to move it around. You should

never buy more than you're sure you'll absolutely need, and what you do buy, you should like an awful lot because you'll be stuck with it for a long time.

Mr. Brecker is hedging. I can see this, not so much on Mr. Brecker, but on Jim Kelly who is developing a thin layer of sweat on the tip of his nose as he tries to close the deal.

Finally, Mr. Brecker comes clean. He thinks he'll wait until next summer, until the ground settles, until he feels better about making a decision, any decision. Nothing seems possible right now.

"I'm sorry about wasting your time," Mr. Brecker fumbles with his hands and apologizes.

"No waste," Jim Kelly says, clearing the table, taking his time leaving the Pyrenees Blue out the longest, his personal favorite, the most expensive in the line. He finally picks it up, balancing the weight of it in his palm as Mr. Brecker continues to apologize.

"It's just so hard these days," Mr. Brecker says, a crack appearing in his voice.

"No problem, understand perfectly." Jim Kelly waves him off. "We see this kind of thing all the time," he adds, trying to staunch the flow of apology and misgiving that has begun to gush out of Mr. Brecker. Jim Kelly wraps up the blue sample in a thick swatch of white cotton.

Have you ever had one of those moments when you catch an unexpected glimpse of yourself, in the lens on someone's glasses or in a store window, and you stop for a second, a little surprised to see yourself out

there in the world mixing around with everybody else and you realize:

"Oh, that's me out there in the middle of living my life?"

Well, it was like that the day I was sitting at Mr. Brecker's dining room table. By accident I caught a glimpse of myself in the oval mirror of Mrs. Brecker's beautiful walnut buffet, and I realized that I -- a musician and anarchist by trade, and one who has no aspirations in the world other than to eat and breathe long enough to witness the total collapse of western civilization -- I was in training to become a tombstone salesman.

This amazing discovery quite naturally led to the next question: how could this have happened?

That, in itself, is a complicated story.

I had this band, see, and we played all original music. We were stubborn about it, this idea of having musical integrity and everything. But one winter we were all starving, the power company was threatening to shut off the heat and there was nothing left in the refrigerator -- your basic cupboard-was-bare situation -- when Morrie calls up. He says he's on our side and understands our dilemma, but there's no sustaining market in this area for original music.

"People want to hear what's on the radio," he tells me.

I tell him, "Morrie, somebody had to write the stuff that's on the radio." But he won't argue with me about this, what he calls "a fine point of distinction," he just says when he calls: I got work for you, or I don't.

Like I was saying, November was lean. Finally, Morrie calls and says, "Shed your pride for once Sal. I got a hot gig for you guys. Big bucks, about sixty miles away."

He assures me we'd be playing to people we would have no chance of ever seeing again. So if we're embarrassed about selling out to commercialism, it won't matter.

"You can play under an assumed name," Morrie says, "'The Rabid Dogs' or something like that."

Take the money at the end of the night and run. Simple. Seven hundred and fifty bucks (less, of course, a twenty-point commission for old Morrie).

"It'll be a caper," he says, chuckling on the other end of the line.

It turns out to be some sort of Dance Club, you know, yuppies and old folks. The band they had booked fell through at the last minute. They are pissing in their pants with joy just to see us walk through the door with our instruments.

We have to play Fifties music which we can fake through easy because it's just one-four-five, one-four-five, three chords all night long, and most of the lyrics I just make up as I go along. I don't worry about it because anyone who may have known the original lyrics back in the Fifties is probably dead, senile, or too interested in the stock market to comment on a missing phrase here and there.

All these people really want is the beat, which is what we give them, that rockin' Fifties beat. Every five or six songs we slow it down a bit and play a blues tune, just to let them rub bellies for a minute, but then it's back to the bop.

In the end, it turns out okay for everyone. These people are eating it up, sweating in their suit coats, smiling and doing those twirl-my-baby-over-the-head moves all night. At the end, we get paid just fine, no problems.

When we're finished, we're busy packing so we can get the hell out of there, when up steps this dude who asks, "Can I speak to you in private?" I turn around and look behind me. "Me," I point to myself. "Yeah, you," the dude says.

He's into granite as it turns out: Lakes Granite & Monument. He says, "Hey kid, I like your style." He says, "you got charisma." He says he has a job for me.

I tell him, No, I'm a musician. I explain that we're a road band and that we travel around from place to place.

He says, "It's no problem." All I need to do is advise the front office where I will be each week and they will forward the newspaper clippings ahead to me for that region.

"You can make the sales calls during the day wherever you are," he says, "and at night you can still go play."

I'm looking at the dude, sizing him up to see how for real he is when he reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out two cigars --one for him and one for me.

"This is the good thing about tombstone sales," he tells me, puffing his cheeks out, the stogy flaring in his face, "there are dead people wherever you go."

You know how they say you should never go grocery shopping when you're hungry?

Well sometimes I think it's a bad idea to make any kind of a decision when you're really hungry, like the kind of hunger I felt that night: like I was hungry in every bone of my body.

The next morning, a Saturday, nine o'clock sharp Jim Kelly is at my front door with my sales materials: a briefcase -- about a foot wide and heavier than shit -- full of granite samples, and a large manila envelope full of newspaper clippings -- obituaries for the most recently departed in my sales territory.

Jim Kelly, as I find out later, is the company's Number One Salesperson. This is not saying much about the company, judging from Jim Kelly's appearance. As far as I can see, his one claim to fame is that several years before he happened to stumble upon a mad widow, so crazed in her grief that he convinced her to buy a mausoleum.

"Fifty thousand big ones," Jim Kelly whoops at my kitchen table after telling me the whole mausoleum story start to finish for the first time. (This is a story I will come to hear many times.)

We are having instant coffee which I've managed to scrounge out of the empty cupboard. My head is throbbing; all I want to do is go back to sleep, but Jim Kelly keeps on talking.

He says, "That was over twelve G's for old Jimbo here." I am figuring it out, sloshing it through the syrup in my slow-moving brain: twenty-five percent. Not bad.

For all the hoopla surrounding this guy -- most of which I must admit is self-generated -- he really seems like just an old Joe who's lost his nerve along with his ability to handle rejection. The way I figure it, he is just biding his time, maxing out his expense account each month, waiting for that one big sale that will take him out in style.

What gives him away is a kind of mustiness. His suits for example, although expensive and neatly pressed, have a shiny worn-around-the-edges look. On his fat little fingers he wears several of those chunky gold rings to give off the impression of years of lucrative deal-making. When he's thinking he puts those fat little fingers into a pyramid with his elbows propped on the table. The impression this is supposed to give off is "please be quiet, great mind at work."

Around his wrist, he wears a Rolex that he must check at least three or four times per minute. Sometimes he's real sneaky about it, just rolling his wrist and checking when he thinks I'm not looking. Sometimes he's more overt. He'll say things like, "let's see, how much time has passed since the last time I checked." The watch is some kind of oracle to him, and I swear the guy doesn't even take a crap without consulting it.

I made a decision some years ago never to wear a watch. I have a belief, albeit a superstitious belief, that the ticking of the clock absorbs

itself into the skin, affecting all the internal organs -- the heart, the liver, the brain -- in such a way that the body begins to tick according to the clock, rather than according to itself.

I have a whole theory about the decline of western civilization relative to this belief, but I'm not prepared to discuss it right now.

In fact, I feel kind of stupid for even having mentioned it.

Mrs. Brecker's obituary: what I would have done with it had I seen it (I did not see it, Jim Kelly saw it, she was in his territory) I would have filed it on my "Tragic" pile.

It's a little system I devised for separating the obit's I got from the front office. To begin with, I'd read them all straight through, one at a time. I always liked to give them one fair read-through before I separated them into piles.

The least I can do, I figured. I would have expected as much.

First, I had the "Tragic" pile which was for those who have gone too quickly, people in their middle years, people with young kids, spouses, things like that. Sometimes if the obit mentions an extended illness, I might decide to put a "Tragic" on the "Sad, But Expected" pile. But generally those who end up in "Sad, But Expected" are in their late-seventies and early-eighties.

I had a pile (which I hated to ever put anybody on but sometimes you see these in the paper) called the "Unfathomables." These were the infants, the kids dead in their teens and early twenties. Whether the

obit mentioned illness, hospital stays, whatever -- these always went onto the "Unfathomables." These were the ones that really got to me.

The old timers, the ninety and hundred-year-olds, I'd put in the "A Blessing" pile. I know this sounds like awfully harsh categorization, but a distinction had to be made somewhere and for my money they don't give you enough information in those obit's to make an informed decision. So sometimes I just had to go with my gut reaction.

Take this one for example:

Ole Thorsrud, 96. Emigrated to America from Norway, 1910. Married Emma Johnson. Farmed until the late-1960s. Resident of Sunnydale Nursing Home.

Now this guy, I don't feel too bad about. Don't get me wrong, I feel bad about them all. But I figured Ole had, as they say, a full life.

Now maybe Ole didn't feel that way about it. Maybe in the last few moments he was saying, Lord give me one more year. Maybe so, but I know there isn't a damn thing you or I could have done about it.

It is possible that Ole, in the end, could have been saying, Thank you God. Thank you, it's over. His life, to me, didn't sound like too big a bed of roses.

He may have been senile, or so sick that he didn't even know what was going on. He could have had cancer, a heart attack, an aneurysm. You never know for sure what is taking all these people, but something is sure as hell doing a good job of it.

As I said earlier, you'd never get enough information in those damn clippings to know how to feel about any of this.

The clippings when they'd arrive from the front office, had a date written on the top left corner. It was the date the obit appeared in the newspaper.

"The law says you can't solicit a family for ten full days," Jim Kelly had told me during one of my training sessions.

"A grace period," he said, "but after that, they're fair game."

Know your markets. This is the lesson that Jim Kelly and Morrie my agent both, in their own way, tried to teach me.

No matter how good the beat is to the song you're playing, if people don't know it, they won't dance to it. Nobody wants to get stuck on the dance floor, Morrie used to whine over the phone, trying to dance to one of those 5/16th parts you like to put in the middle of your songs.

Nobody likes to look like they got caught in a strobe light.

Nobody wants to hear the "Eating Red Meat Blues."

It was a shame, too. There we were on the road, making good money, playing all those old tunes that everybody knows and feels comfortable dancing to. Every week the guys in the band are saying, "We'll take this gig, temporarily."

They say, "we'll work on our own songs during the afternoons. In the meantime, we'll be eating." But it never happened. When the afternoons came, they were too tired, or too hung over to practice. So we slid

through the days and into the nights, playing that old stuff, just playing it over and over.

During the day in the motel room, when I wasn't reading through my clippings or getting ready to go play at night, I liked to look through my granite samples.

What I liked to do the best was lay them all out on the bedspread and test myself on square footage costs, trying to remember where each piece came from. I was especially fond of the pink sample from Mexico with the little flecks of black in it, and I hated to admit that I concurred with Jim Kelly on anything, but the blue one from France was really the most magnificent. Although even with my company discount I would never have sprung for it.

Sometimes I could spend a whole afternoon polishing the pieces, feeling the weight on my palm. When the guys would come knocking at my door to go eat, I wouldn't answer.

Sometimes I wondered what it might be like to go to your final resting place under a piece of this stuff and never have to worry any more about selling out, or finding something to eat or trying to figure out what you were going to do with the rest of your life. Sometimes I wondered what it would feel like to be a rock for a couple billion years.

One day I really spooked myself by getting under the covers and laying all the pieces on the bedspread on top of me. It didn't feel all that bad, really, kind of heavy and safe. After a while it started to wear on you, though, like what I figured it might feel like after a couple hundred years.

Everything was going along pretty well until I started getting calls from the Lakes Granite Company. They're wondering: how am I doing, if I am making any sales, do I have any orders for them to fill. I decide not to answer these calls.

One morning, eight o'clock, there's a knock on my motel room door. After I get my clothes on, I look through the shade and there's old Jimbo Kelly in the flesh standing right outside my front door freezing his ass off.

The truth is, every day I fully intended to make the calls, but by the time I got through the obit's, I just didn't have the energy. To tell you the truth, it took everything I had just to lug that sample case from motel room to motel room every week.

"Well, well, well," Jim Kelly says when I open the door. "I was in the neighborhood," he says, "just thought I'd drop by and see how the young folks are doing."

I know this is bullshit because I'm a hundred miles from home and this is not Jim Kelly's neighborhood, but I let him in the door anyway and go to make some tea for us. He begins to question me about my progress. Before I can even answer, he has my obit folder out, his big, hairy hands pawing through all the clippings.

"Sometimes it's hard," he says, "to get a feel for these." He picks up one really long clipping -- Mr. Gillespie. He has picked up Mr. Gillespie and is reading him. I jump at him, trying to get the clipping away, but he dodges me.

"This is a good, solid one," he says. "See. This man owned a photography studio for fifty-two years. Comes from a traditional Italian family, lots of kids. This is a good granite lead."

"Thirteen kids." I groan, feeling sick, "thirty-five grandkids."

Mrs. Gillespie when she answers the door is ready for us.

She's wearing the traditional mourning garb: black skirt, black blouse, black sweater, black shawl draped across her shoulders. It's a color that, thank goodness, looks good on her because, being Italian, she'll probably have to wear this outfit for the rest of her earthly days.

She escorts us to a dim parlor where she seats us in chairs worn thin from use. The parlor is so small that our knees almost touch as we sit.

"So sorry to have heard about Mr. Gillespie's passing," Jim Kelly says sitting down. "A pillar of the community," he says.

Mrs. Gillespie nods, silently. Her hair is gathered up in a hairnet, the seam coming together in a dark knot at her forehead. In her hands, she holds a rosary. The beads are black and no longer shiny. They are beads worn down from years of constant touching.

Mrs. Gillespie works the rosary as we speak to her. She pauses for several moments on one bead and then, that round of prayers complete, her old dry fingers move to find the next.

All the while Jim Kelly unpacks his granite samples, she works the rosary. Jim Kelly sits uncomfortably in the tiny chair, balancing the samples on a white towel on his knees. She works the rosary as Jim Kelly

speaks to her about the art of stone cutting, about engraving, about honoring the dead.

When he takes out the green sample -- the one from Turkey that is so rare -- Mrs. Gillespie sets down the beads and picks up the green piece. She looks at it for a long time, rubbing her thumbs in small circles, considering its weight, its color, the dark concentric lines within it.

"How much of this," she asks, after a long silence, "would it be possible for me to get?"

Jim Kelly sits straight up in his chair. From where I sit, I can see his pupils dilate. He is beyond simple gravemarker at this point, beyond headstone, beyond considerations of single or double. He's thinking mausoleum, he's thinking charnel house.

A thin layer of sweat develops on his upper lip. To me his eyes look like Las Vegas slot machines spinning dollar signs all around. He's out of his mind, thinking crypt, thinking shrine, he's thinking fucking catacomb.

Before I know what I'm doing, I am out of my chair. I get this feeling of panic, like we're all racing toward something -- what I don't know, but it's something big and inescapable, something nobody can get around, like a brick wall we're all going to hit doing 100 miles per hour. And I don't want to crash into that wall. I don't want my life flattened against it.

Before Jim Kelly can answer, I am out the door, running down the street with my thumb in the air, looking for that road that might lead anywhere, anywhere away from here.

And now it seems I have worn my tires thin on that road; I have worn them down to nothing.

And still I can only say I know a few things for sure about roads -- that there are roads that take you through small towns and then there are roads that take you into big cities; that there are roads that require you to slow down to 15 and yield to pedestrians, and there are roads that will let you scream by doing 65.

I have spent my life on those minor roads watching the landmarks float by as if in a dream -- the peeling and chaffing Sinclair stations with the sad Buddha-dinosaurs out front, the slack-jawed attendants who don't even consider it ironic when they offer to pump your gas: attendants who say "howdy" and really mean it.

How this has happened to me is the single greatest mystery of my life.

My grandmother before she died used to live directly off of a major highway (I-80 which runs from Chicago to places west). When I was passing through I would stop in and see her.

After she'd make me her crummy instant coffee, and bring out some of those dry store-bought sugar cookies she usually kept around the house, and force me to sit down and listen to her dentures clicking as she chewed, she used to say to me, "Sal, don't have too much pride." She used to say, "Kid, you gotta go where the work is."

All those backroads with their many curves, and their no-pass lanes, and their grandpa-doing-40-in-the-Chrysler have been my home. And that singular blinking streetlight that swings in the middle of every small town in America like some big yellow all-seeing eye of god -- that has been my witness.

What I ran away from that day, I can't even begin to recall. I remember saying to no one in particular, no one other than the wind: "let the band do without me, let Jim Kelly pick up my samples."

And for just a few hours that day, I ceased to care what would happen to me. I thumbed ride after ride after ride from anyone who offered -- anything to get me far away from where I had been.

And as the white lines of the freeway scrolled by, I remember saying to myself over and over: "I am history, history, history."

SOMEWHERE IN A HOUSE WHERE YOU ARE NOT

There is sunlight coming through windows
somewhere in a house where you are not.

An old man and old woman eating breakfast
to the sound of the clock, out of words,

empty of thoughts, but for who died this year
and of what. If you follow the sun to that house

you will find the long lost driveway
that no highway intersects, the loose gravel

crackling under your wheels, the sun breaking
cleanly free of a horizon. You must park.

You must come to an absolute halt
outside the house where you are not,

letting your many necessary miles drop
from your bones like dust. Sit and wait.

Do not fear the mop-faced dog. He pounds
his tail for you. He is uninterested

in your tires. The old woman will soon come,
peeking through the ancient blinds, saying,

who on earth, and seeing your face
will hold out her hands, warm and soft

as good black dirt, and take you inside,
the house filling with your arrival,

SOMEWHERE IN A HOUSE WHERE YOU ARE NOT -2

the old man smiling his surprised skeleton smile,
the old woman asking, have you come far,

was it a long drive, are you hungry, are you
tired, to which you may answer, yes

and lie down in the bed they have kept
empty in your absence, reserved for the day

you would need this room full of nothing,
but rare morning light, and the stroke

of an old brown hand, inviting you
to rest, to sleep, to feel the earth

revolve slowly around and around
without you.